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# THE MISSES MAKE-BELIEVE

BY

MARY STUART BOYD

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1906

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# THE MISSES MAKE-BELIEVE

## CHAPTER I

### Friendly Criticism

THE shadows were beginning to lengthen as John Hornecke, leaving his office after a hard day's work, walked homewards through Lincoln's Inn Fields, towards the sunset.

He was a broad-shouldered man, somewhat over middle age and considerably over middle height. He had a strong pleasant face though at this moment certain annoying thoughts had imprinted a frown on his forehead and lent severity to the mouth almost hidden by the thick growth of beard and moustache.

As he turned into Winton Square a victoria passed him. Its only occupant, a fair-haired young lady, chancing to catch sight of the pedestrian, bowed graciously. For half a moment Hornecke hesitated as though he would fain have detained

her, but, evidently thinking better of the matter, he lifted his hat and, with deepening frown, kept on his way.

Ascending the steps of Number 21, he opened the door with a latch-key and entered. It was a handsome house, but one whose sombre exterior and such glimpses of interior arrangements as might be caught through the windows afforded striking contrast in their ponderous substantiality to the more ornate residences in the Square.

Within, the same sober taste evidently prevailed. The hall-rugs and stair-carpeting were handsome if inelegant. The tones of the wall-decoration revealed none of the airy grace characteristic of recent fashions. All was dull in tone, turgid in effect. It needed no very astute mind to declare the occupants of 21 Winton Square to be folks of intense inherited respectability, not cursed by mutability perhaps, but decidedly unblest by imagination.

A parlour-maid appeared as Hornecke, having disburdened himself of his hat and stick, was glancing over the visiting-cards that littered the hall-table.

"Your mistress alone?" he asked.

"No, sir. It's her 'At Home' afternoon. One lady hasn't gone yet. Miss Parsons, sir."

In the drawing-room the faint elusive perfume of Chinese tea still haunted the sultry July atmosphere. The disarray of tea-cups, the partly rifled condition of the silver dishes of cakes, the indented surfaces of the cushions, made mute proclamation that Mrs. Hornecke's afternoon had been well attended.

By the tea-table sat the hostess and her sole remaining guest, their heads close together in apparent interchange of confidence. On the thick soft carpet Hornecke's step made little perceptible sound, and, before his presence was noticed, he heard Miss Parsons—with the air of one delivering herself of a *bon mot*—say:

"Perhaps I shouldn't repeat it, but, do you know, they call them the Misses Make-believe!"

"And who are the Misses Make-believe, and who are 'they' that christen them so?" Hornecke asked, as he shook the visitor's hand, and exchanged greetings with the mistress of the house after the perfunctory fashion of uneffusive relatives, who, under a mask of indifference, conceal genuine mutual affection.

Possibly a premonition that the gossip was not altogether unconnected with the young lady he had met driving away from the door prompted his ques-

tion, which had the effect of putting Miss Parsons —who, in company with a number of marriageable females, was desirous of standing well with John Hornecke—in an undeniable flutter.

"Oh, it was naughty of me to repeat such ridiculous gossip. It is only a silly nickname people have for the Fleming girls—Belle and Eileen, you know." In her attempt to pass off the statement as humorous, Miss Parsons ended with a staccato giggle.

"Is it? Who calls them so?"

John Hornecke's words were few, but as his tone was one that, coming from the lips of so eligible a bachelor, was hardly calculated to fall encouragingly on the hearing of even the thickest-skinned of spinsters, Miss Parsons tried extenuation.

"Oh everybody calls them that. I was quite certain Mrs. Hornecke must already have heard it, or I would never have repeated it, for I hate nicknames. I always say the giving of nicknames is the cheapest form of wit. It isn't a bit clever, really. Anybody could do it who tried. But, really, I can't understand how I came to repeat the phrase, for I have always resolutely set my face against scandal. But in this case as you and Belle and Eileen Fleming are connected, I suppose I stupidly thought you

might be interested to hear what people said of them."

But her host, maintaining a disapproving and disconcerting silence, had already left the room; whereupon Miss Parsons, still feebly prattling palliation, felt constrained to take her departure. And, her labour of receiving over for the afternoon, Mrs. Hornecke, first ordering fresh tea to be taken into the snuggery where she guessed he had sought refuge, followed her step-son thither.

"Well, John!"

"Well, Mater!"

Mrs. Hornecke was seventeen years older than her step-son, with whom since her widowhood ten years earlier she had lived in admirable amity.

She was a Scotswoman, frankly outspoken, but warm-hearted and generous to a degree. In maidenhood she had been tall, lean, uncomely. Now at fifty-five, when years had silvered her abundant hair and mellowed her angles into curves, she could lay claim to a distinction of appearance earlier denied her.

Being a wise woman, she left it to her step-son to introduce the topic that at the moment occupied both their thoughts, speaking first of indifferent matters.

"Belle Fleming was here this afternoon?" Hornecke plunged abruptly into the subject as she handed him a second cup of tea. "Their carriage passed me in the Square."

"Yes. She did not wait long. I didn't urge her to stay, for I knew you'd dislike finding her here when you got home. And indeed she only ran in to remind us not to forget their party to-morrow night."

John Hornecke groaned.

"Another of those ghastly Receptions! Why can some women never understand that their attempts at festivity are dismal failures?" he demanded indignantly, hastily drinking off his tea, and rising to rummage for a pipe and tobacco on the mantelpiece.

Mrs. Hornecke's grey eyes twinkled, and there was a sly note in her voice as she retorted:

"And why do some men who could as easily stay away from such dismal festivities, make a point of never missing one?"

"That's an entirely different matter. I am a distant relative," ("Only by marriage," interjected Mrs. Hornecke), "and I stand in the position of the Flemings' guardian. And though I can't prevent their driving straight to destruction with their

blatant extravagances and affectations, I go to their parties just to see that other people treat them with proper respect."

"Where was Ellen?" he asked a moment later, without turning round.

"Her sister said Ellen—I beg her pardon, Eileen—was resting. But I suppose she was down in the kitchen trying to make half-a-dozen packets of table-jelly and a bag of flour and a dozen shop eggs into supper for fifty people. And she'll do it, too," Mrs. Hornecke added, as her step-son made a gesture of impatience. "And her cakes and jellies will look so nice that you won't know them from real cakes and jellies—until you taste them! All the same, I don't know how with their income they contrive to live as they do at all. Though you'd never guess it to see them driving about, or to hear them talk, I'm certain they must starve themselves in secret. If only they would be content to live sensibly, without all this absurd attempt at keeping up appearances!"

"It's bound to come to an end soon."

John Hornecke broke a silence during which he had moodily contemplated the empty grate. "Their lease of the house runs out in a few months, and I know they have been intrenching on their capital.

They haven't paid the slightest attention to my advice about keeping up the property, and I'm afraid the claim for dilapidations will be a heavy one."

"From what Amelia Parsons hinted, people seem to have a shrewd suspicion of the facts," said Mrs. Hornecke, nodding her head sagely.

"I wonder a sensible woman like you would listen to spiteful gossip." Hornecke spoke with asperity.

"But John, only a moment ago you said exactly the same thing yourself!"

"Yes—but it's one thing to criticise one's relatives oneself, and quite another to sit and listen to outsiders doing it.

Which axiom Mrs. Hornecke's commonsense accepted without demur, though she would have been more than human, if, before rustling up-stairs to exchange one handsome silk gown for another a shade more ornate in which to dine, she had not paused to wing a barbed shaft.

"The nickname Amelia Parsons quoted was not altogether inappropriate—was it, John?"

"Damned silly scandal-mongering old maid!" retorted her step-son.

## CHAPTER II

### Preparations

THE little victoria drew up with a jerk at the door of the Flemings' tall narrow house in Half Down Street, and Belle alighted.

It was by no means a smart equipage. Jobbed for the London season on the most moderate of terms, was proclaimed aloud by the dull cracked varnish, the faded linings, the old-fashioned trappings. Even the servitor who held the reins was far from presenting the spick-and-span aspect of the genuine private coachman.

Still, it was a carriage, and as such enjoyed the privilege of entry to the Park. And Belle Fleming, after she had given the shoddy coachman her orders, —which she did as slowly and deliberately as possible,—paused a moment on the steps to watch it drive away, and mentally to congratulate herself upon its possession.

That the conveyance was merely the temporary property of the Misses Fleming by consideration of

a monthly hire, scarcely disconcerted their sense of gratification, which arose from the fact, that, during the months of May, June and July they managed to "keep a carriage" at a smaller cost probably than anyone else in London. Their manner of procedure was as follows: The dullest part of Lent, a time when livery-stable owners see their horses eating their heads off, and the season looms before them as a period of certain expenditure and uncertain income, was the Misses Flemings' opportunity. Then would they indite wily post-cards to a dozen or more of the smaller carriage-hirers stationed within easy reach of Half Down Street, inquiring their most moderate terms for supplying a victoria or night-brougham with man in livery for the use of two ladies during the three summer months.

For several succeeding days their doorstep would be the rendezvous of hoarse-voiced red-faced men with tight leggings and an encompassing odour of the stable, most of whom opened negotiations by demanding exorbitant prices, and, when these were flouted, promptly exhibited an obliging sliding-scale of charges. By dint of playing one applicant against another, the bottom price was ultimately reached, when the ladies closed with it, and for the subsequent three months rejoiced in the luxury of a

more or less shabby carriage, drawn by a broken-down steed, and driven by a coachman—in livery to the waist—for an incredibly small sum.

About as marked a difference existed between a smart electric-lit *coupé* and the Flemings' hired vehicle as distinguishes a Pullman drawing-room car form a third-class railway-carriage. Still, for the time being it ranked as a private carriage, and the possession—though necessarily transient—bestowed upon its temporary owners the peculiar halo that, to certain minds, appears to encircle the brows of "carriage-people."

After watching the victoria turn the corner, Miss Fleming seized the massive knocker, and used it in the aggressive and defiant manner supposed to denote cognisance of the ways of society. But she added a tiny *rat-tat-tat!* with the handle of her sunshade, with the intention of warning her sister not to abandon any occupation she might be engaged in, in the expectation of receiving a guest.

"Where is Miss Eileen?" she asked as the footman, bearing evidence of having hurriedly struggled into his coat,—the collar was still upturned at the back of his neck,—opened the hall-door.

"I'm here, Belle," Eileen's voice answered from the foot of the kitchen stairs. "Come down."

And putting her sunshade in the umbrella-stand, Belle descended the dingy staircase leading to that *avernus* of the London house—the basement.

"Well, did you see Aunt Hornecke?" Eileen asked, as Belle sank languidly down in a chair beside the table where her sister was busy preparing viands that bore a striking resemblance to the refreshments of the stereotyped evening party. At a stove at the further end of the kitchen an old woman was juggling with the dampers by way of regulating the heat of the oven. "And is she going to lend us the crystal, and the silver, and the big china bowl for the claret-cup?"

"Yes. She has promised to bring round the things in the morning. I said I would send Carl to fetch them, but Aunt Hornecke said she was certain he would have plenty of other things to do, so she would bring them. She says"—lowering her voice —"she wonders why we go to all this trouble and expense for people who do not appreciate it. It's hateful of her, saying things like that."

"Oh, I don't mind what she says *to* us. That doesn't worry me a bit. It's what she says *about* us. . . . Did you ask her not to tell John?" Eileen added in an altered tone, pausing a moment in the act of decorating the top of a batch of tiny

pink-iced cakes with crystallised cherries and foliage cunningly cut out of crystallised angelica, to wait for the answer.

"She promised she wouldn't, Eileen. I wonder why you are so anxious to prevent John Hornecke knowing that we borrow. Very few private houses have enough cutlery and glass for a big reception, and it costs a ransom to hire everything from a caterer."

"Well, you know how John hates people to pretend to be better off than they are, or to ask more guests than they have room for—or, or anything. But I'm done now. Thank Heaven! That's all for to-night. Sarah, you might put the jelly-moulds in the coolest part of the larder. The sandwiches we won't cut till to-morrow. Miss Belle and I will have a big pot of tea and the cold lamb and some toast served in the library, instead of dinner, and go to bed early."

"It's always at this stage that I feel certain our party will be a dreadful failure," confided Eileen as she wearily ascended the steep stair. "I don't believe anybody we really want will come. Everybody has so many engagements just now, and we have so few attractions to offer."

"And the worst of it is the Moseleys aren't com-

ing. When I called this afternoon on my way back from Winton Square to remind them that we were depending on their help to-morrow night, Clara Moseley said they were so sorry, but when they promised to come to us, Dan and she had quite for-forgotten that they had promised to chaperon a theatre-party to-morrow night. She said they would look in here on their way back if it was not too late, and if they did not make up a supper-party after the play. She says it's an old engagement, but our cards were out nearly a month ago. And though she did not mean to confess it, I discovered that it is the new comedy they are going to. It was not produced more than a fortnight ago. Of course, this engagement was more attractive than our party, so they threw us over."

A dual purpose incited the Misses Fleming to issue their invitations extravagantly early, the first reason being that none save the most obdurate could lay claim to non-existent engagements a complete calendar month ahead, the second that only the least hospitable of the bidden could send out invitations in the interval without including the Flemings in their list.

"Our parties are not exciting enough for Mr. and Mrs. Dan Moseley," was Eileen's bitter com-

ment. "What idiots we were to pin our faith to Dan's promise to help us to entertain our guests. It's quite true what Aunt Hornecke says. Why should we give a party at all? I'm dead sick of this struggle to be smart. We pinch and scrape, and try to make things look affluent, and it takes nobody in. I'm certain the people who come here are simply laughing at us. Only those who have absolutely nothing better on hand do come to us. And nobody comes for the pleasure of seeing *us*. The Horneckes come to disapprove. One or two like Bertie Harlim and the silly Green girl come to see each other. And the rest come either from curiosity or because they are bored at home and think they must go somewhere. Yes, we might save ourselves all the trouble and expense. We are nothing and nobodies. Not a solitary person comes to this house because he or she really cares for us!"

Eileen had stopped abruptly, her eyes full of indignant tears, when a glance at her sister's overcast face and despondent attitude made her hasten to qualify her sweeping assertion.

"Nobody—except Major Bryson. He is always one exception. Forgive me, Belle. I quite forgot the Major. He is the exception, of course!"

## CHAPTER III

### Major Bryson

THE gallant Major's one cult was self. During his term of military service he had worked a little and grumbled a great deal. His age-limit reached, an ungrateful nation, failing to perceive any special inducement for retaining by promotion his grudgingly rendered services, had elected to dispense with them; thereby enabling the Major to devote his entire energies to extracting as much bodily comfort from life as was compatible with the niggardly limits of his pension; leaving him free also to enjoy a permanent grievance against a Government that, to quote his own words, "after sucking a man's brains and squandering his youthful vigour by sending him to sizzle in beastly hot climates, throws him aside like a burnt-out cigar-stump, just at an age when, in any other profession, he would be considered in his prime."

Perhaps he had not always been so self-centred. Before years of nothing to do but amuse himself,

and nothing to study but his own comfort, had matured a latent vein of selfishness until it became a chronic ailment, he might have had an occasional thought for others. Now all his concern was for himself.

Major Bryson's slender income was skilfully apportioned to meet his various wants. His lodging —a single room, though when referring to it he dignified it by the appellation of "chambers"— where he did little more than sleep and breakfast, cost a modest sum. A definite amount was set aside to meet the expense of meals at his Club, so that every invitation to dinner or luncheon was a distinct gain. He dressed well, without exceeding the allowance he annually devoted to his tailor. His belongings were insured against fire, and against burglars. His person was insured against sickness and accident; against everything, indeed, except the one sure calamity—death. But, as he argued with himself, a life assurance would be useless in that he personally would never reap the slightest benefit from it. Why then waste a penny on one?

Major Bryson's days were passed in a carefully arranged routine. At 10 a. m. coffee, a roll, and one of the halfpenny morning papers were brought to him in bed. About noon he issued from his

"chambers" immaculately attired, and sauntered to the Club, where, before lunching, he skimmed the more expensive journals. The afternoon he devoted to walking in the Park and paying calls. In the evening he dressed at his lodging; if he had no other engagement, returning to the Club at night to dine, and afterwards to play bridge for moderate stakes till a late hour.

To sum up: Major Bryson had no positive vices, if he owned only negative virtues.

During the preceding two months he had fallen into the habit of dropping in to the Flemings more and more frequently. To confess the truth, the houses where he was certain of a warm reception had gradually diminished in number. An idle man with an infinity of leisure hours to fill is apt to wear threadbare his welcome at the houses of his married friends; whereas the Flemings' tea-table was always daintily spread, and Belle never forgot that during the hot weather he liked a slice of lemon in his tea in place of milk.

Nothing appeals to a man, especially to a lonely selfish man, as does feminine attention to his little foibles; and within the last few weeks Major Bryson's fancy had been almost unconsciously veering in the direction of Belle Fleming and matrimony.

He had made the sisters' acquaintance during the previous summer under auspices that, the Major being a bit of a tuft-hunter, proved no inconsid erable factor in his estimate of their social standing.

Lady Turntowers, a peeress of tolerant sympathies, with an unusually strong sense of gratitude and an aristocratic disregard for the grammatical conventions that restrict the conversation of less high-born folk, had not forgotten that she owed young Pilchester's recovery from a severe attack of whooping-cough to (under Heaven) Sir James Fleming, who was her family physician. It was just at the time of his wife's death, and finding that his motherless little girls were also convalescent from whooping-cough, Lady Turntowers insisted on carrying them off to the coast to qualify for a clean bill of health in company with her boy.

Though the Countess was a busy woman, her attentions to the Fleming girls had never been allowed to drop, and during the years succeeding the loss of their father no season had passed without Belle and Eileen Fleming receiving an invitation for one or more of her big crushes, and sometimes being bidden to an informal meal as well.

Major Bryson's connection with the Countess was decidedly more casual than was that of the

Flemings. Still the fact of having first met under the patrician roof gave both him and the Misses Make-Believe a somewhat unduly exalted notion of each other's social position.

The acquaintance thus felicitously begun was renewed by chance encounters in the Park, which meetings were shortly followed by an invitation to the Major for one of the Flemings' evening Receptions.

"For of course," as the sisters agreed, "anybody who is a friend of Lady Turntowers must be a desirable person to know.

The close of the previous season had for a time put an end to their meetings. Major Bryson's Club being closed for re-decoration, he departed to take his annual cure at some Continental baths, just about the time the Flemings left town to pay what they—by a slight stretch of imagination—termed "country-house visits." The fact being that, having succeeded in letting their furnished house,—though at a very low rate,—they had arranged to spend the following two months in boarding on extremely moderate terms at an unfashionable resort on the Welsh coast.

During the winter months the new friends saw little of each other. As became an unencumbered

man who was both a fair shot and a reliable bridge player, Major Bryson was a useful guest at shooting-parties; while, to confess the truth, the Misses Make-believe did not greatly care to see their friends during their period of hibernation—not exactly a period wherein they lived upon the provender they had gained during summer, but rather a time wherein they existed economically in order to have a little store of pelf wherewith to make a show of abundance in summer.

In winter they still kept a callow footman, because a young foreigner besides costing less money looked more imposing and did more work than a parlour-maid. But the carriage had vanished, and rigid economy, not to say niggardliness, ruled the exchequer. In the glorious summer days when walking is a pleasure, the Flemings drove in their carriage. During the "dirty months," as Belle Fleming called them, they went afoot or in busses, and reached their few entertainments in cabs.

This period of apparent hibernation was actually the busiest time of the year, for therein they made ample recompense for their summer idleness, by being extremely industrious in secret. Then it was that their clever fingers fabricated their modish garments for the coming season.

There is no place in the world where femininities can be purchased so cheaply or so dearly as in London, and none knew better than the Misses Make-Believe where to look for bargains. Though they studied prices and styles at all seasons, their actual purchasing was compressed into the first and last weeks of the January sales, when summer silks, muslins and such like unseasonable flummery are at a discount.

With the opening of the following May, when showy blossoms again filled the window-boxes of the Half Down Street house, and the carriage appeared regularly to take the inmates for their airing in the Park, Major Bryson had begun to calculate the probable extent of the sisters' joint income. After much secret observation and calculation he had come to the conclusion that, although they owned the lease of the house in Half Down Street, a footman and a carriage and a certain amount of entertaining could not possibly be kept up under an expenditure of twelve hundred a year.

He did not guess that by dint of secret pinching and scraping the Flemings managed to do it on about half the amount he had estimated. Nor did he guess that with the close of the summer the carriage—like Cinderella's—vanished. That when

during the off-season the house would let furnished, they gladly vacated it; though that was a likelihood that yearly grew less probable, as those who could afford to pay for even a temporary residence within the bounds of Mayfair, demanded electric light and sundry other conveniences which the old house lacked. He had yet to learn that the sisters had a way of holding themselves in abeyance throughout the dark months, coming out with renewed vigour and zest for enjoyment in the spring.

By the morning of the day fixed for the Flemings' party Major Bryson had arrived at the conclusion that the sacrifices entailed by the relinquishment of his bachelor freedom might be more than counterbalanced by the increase of comfort gained. He had even got the length of wondering whether, in the event of his marrying Belle Fleming, the money he would save over the transaction would enable him to keep a riding-horse; a hitherto ungratified ambition, and one that the gradual increase of his waist measurement was daily threatening to make more desirable.

Had Major Bryson known, as he sipped his coffee and complacently decided Belle Fleming's future with a view to his own benefit, that that young lady and her sister had been up since dawn,

sweeping, dusting and executing the work of several housemaids in preparation for their Reception of that evening, his faith in their united finances, and in his own judgment, would have been severely shaken.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Flemings' Reception

"I'm thankful we are having an *evening* party." Eileen sank down on a chair in the dining-room, and taking off the muslin mob-cap she had worn to protect her hair while dusting, was fanning her flushed face with it. "Everything in this house is so dingy and shabby that nothing but the pink shades over every light will make the rooms look even tolerable. Oh dear! It is hot!"

"This is the filthiest old house in London," pronounced Belle, who was arranging flowers at a side-table. "Nothing will ever make it look anything but disgustingly grimy except repapering and painting from attic to cellar, and that is just what it can't have."

Miss Fleming spoke testily. The day was intolerably hot, even for late July in London; and her efforts to make the twenty-shillingsworth of flowers

—to procure which she had paid an early morning visit to Covent Garden market—appear as though they had cost twenty pounds, had not been attended by success.

"At the Turntowers' ball the papers said the floral decorations cost five hundred pounds, and that on the great staircase alone—oh! Belle, do you remember how lovely the roses were?—the garlands cost over three hundred pounds."

"That was silly extravagance, if it wasn't a newspaper lie." Belle spoke with certainty. We all have decided opinions regarding the extravagances of others. "If it had been January, when flowers are scarce and dear! But to pay so much for flowers in June when they are so plentiful is a positive sin. If the lazy gardeners at Turntowers had done their duty they would have sent up all the roses, and everything else that was required. But as for five hundred pounds! Why, if I had been able to spend ten pounds this morning, I could have made this house a bower! As it is, these wretched things look as thaugh they were already beginning to wilt, even although I put them in hot water the moment I got home."

As she spoke, a florist's van stopped at the door; and the man, after ringing the bell, lifted out a huge

wooden box and began ascending the doorsteps carrying the cumbrous burden in his arms.

"It's a mistake, of course. Something come to the wrong house, just to tantalize us."

"Flowers for Mees."

Karl had entered bearing the great box, as the florist's van drove off.

"There is a mistake. I didn't order these. Run and call the van-man back."

"They *are* for us, Belle." Eileen, more energetic than her elder sister, had been examining the label. "The address is quite right:—'The Misses Fleming, 27 Half Down Street, W.' And they are from that lovely shop in Regent Street. Somebody who is coming to-night must have sent them. I wonder who it can have been?"

"There doesn't seem to be any message with them." Belle had opened the box, and uncovering the wealth of blossom concealed by the wrappings of the paper, was revelling in the fragrance. "Oh, Eileen, see! such exquisite blooms: roses and lilies and smilax! All the lovely things I longed for at the market this morning."

"I don't think we require to guess very hard to guess who sent these." Eileen was smiling now, all her fatigue forgotten. Even Belle's cross ex-

pression had gone. "If you ask my opinion, I'd say the sender's name began with B., and I don't think that I'd be far wrong!"

The hot busy hours bustled by. At noon Mrs. Hornecke called, in a four-wheeler. In addition to the crystal and silver and the great china bowl—which being an heirloom she had for safety conveyed tightly clasped in her arms—she had brought, as the result of a hint from her step-son, a dozen bottles of claret from the family cellar. Also a big sheaf of *lilium speciosum,* a purchase prompted by her own kind heart.

The Horneckes did not keep an equipage of their own.

"No private carriage for me," Mrs. Hornecke was wont to say bluntly. "With a telephone in the house to the nearest livery-stables, and a cab-rank just round the corner, it would be absurd of John and me to burden ourselves with the care of horses and a man. Judging from the experiences of our friends, whenever we particularly needed the carriage, either the horses would be ill or the man would say they were; or if the horses were in working condition the coachman would be ill, or he'd pretend he was. No. If John requires a hansom a whistle brings one round in a moment; and if I

want a brougham to go shopping or calling, a word on the telephone brings one to the door before I have time to put on my bonnet."

"I think Eileen Fleming must be going to be married," Mrs. Hornecke said, as, late the same day, she drove with her step-son through the dusk towards Half Down Street. "When I called this morning with the claret the house was full of flowers —lovely ones too. And when I couldn't help hinting that they must have cost a pretty penny, Eileen said they were a present. I asked her right out 'From whom?', for I hate mysteries. Then she admitted that they had been delivered at the door without either card or message. But I could see they had a shrewd idea who had sent them. And Eileen seemed so pleased about it that I'm sure she must be engaged. No man would have spent money so lavishly except he had a notion of one of them. It would be a good thing if either Belle or Eileen got married, wouldn't it?"

"Would it? Oh! I suppose it would." At her question Hornecke had flushed hotly. "I wonder you don't have an open carriage on a stifling night like this," he added, abruptly changing the subject. "A brougham is simply suffocating."

When the Misses Fleming held a Reception they

liked their little world to know it. The Horneckes arrived at 27 Half Down Street to find themselves the centre of a quite respectable crowd that had gathered, attracted by the length of red carpet—a bit acquired a bargain at one of Maple's sales, and carefully treasured for such occasions—that was spread over the steps. The exterior of the house looked its gayest. At night any deficiencies of paint were invisible. The blinds had not been drawn, the windows were widely opened, and through the transparent lace of the curtains the pink-shaped lamps shone alluringly.

"Well, I must say those girls do make the most of things," Mrs. Hornecke acknowledged in whispered confidence as they ascended the stairs, and the footman uttered a garbled version of their names; "here's Belle receiving on the landing as though she were a Duchess!"

"How d'ye do, Belle?" Mrs. Hornecke's best evening gown fitted more tightly than was compatible with easy stair-climbing, and its owner was panting a little. "We were just remarking how nice everything looked. Where's Eileen?"

"*So* good of you coming—in this dreadful heat too. Eileen is in the drawing-room. Will you go in there?"

Wearing her most gracious smile, Belle had hastened forward to welcome them on the top step. And greatly though John Hornecke disapproved of his wards, he felt constrained to admit that as Belle Fleming stood with the roseate lights falling softly on her golden hair, and sparkling on the tinsel of her bespangled gown, she looked a beautiful and handsomely appointed woman. All the same, he knew that half-a-dozen years ago her hair had been as dark as was her sister's, and could guess —feminine contrivances are not altogether hidden from a man who has a communicative step-mother —that in all probability her dress had previously seen service in variant guises.

Mrs. Hornecke had already passed on, but her step-son lingered, and Belle was pleased to have him there, not guessing that he had something to say to her; an unpleasant message to deliver that could no longer be shirked. But even as the words rose to his lips the voice from below announced:

"Meeses de Palfrey and the Meeses de Palfrey." And Belle swam forward in readiness to receive an alert matron supported by two bored daughters, who were laboriously making the ascent.

"*So* good of you to come—and in this dreadful heat too," she was repeating mechanically, when

Hornecke, hearing the sound of further arrivals in the hall, decided that the hour was unsuited for private conference and moved towards the drawing-room. There, owing to the defection of Mr. Dan Moseley, Eileen was in charge of a musical programme devised with the laudable intention of making the most of the scanty array of talent present.

At the moment of her guardian's entrance she was engaged in finding a seat with a background sufficiently artistic to satisfy the demands of a mature maiden somewhat scantily draped in flame-hued chiffon. In the opinion of this lady the chief attractions of her performance appeared to be the exhibition of her shoulders (scrawnily naked), arms (ditto), and ankles (flame silk); the fact that she played the mandoline feebly, and sang to its accompaniment in what she flattered herself was Spanish, being wholly incidental matters.

Round the room carefully attired young women sat with gloomy faces, as though even thus early they were convinced that this entertainment might be counted among the blanks of their existence. The men present seemed in years either immature or aged; in manner they were either painfully backward or laboriously gallant.

A cursory glance seemed to Hornecke sufficient assurance that already the Flemings' Reception had resolved itself into one of those deadly dull occasions to be met with even in Mayfair, whereon otherwise sensible folks, for lack of better occupation, endure protracted amateur musical efforts with an outward attention worthy the highest achievements of operatic art.

Shaking hands with Eileen while the lady with the mandoline, having at length got placed to her liking, was tuning her instrument, Hornecke noticed that despite the rose-shaded lamps she looked worn and weary. "Thank Heaven!" he thought, "*she* hasn't dyed her hair."

"You look tired."

"I ought to. I've been on my feet since six o'clock this morning."

Hornecke regarded her with mingled reproof and pity.

"Then why do it? Why give yourself all this trouble?"

Eileen opened wide grey eyes at the rude question.

"If we didn't ask people to parties, they'd never invite us in return."

"If your friends merely invite you to their houses

because you have paid your shot, their hospitality is hardly worth having. Is it?"

But the duties of hostess left Eileen neither time nor inclination to listen to Hornecke's platitudes. Though to the casual eye she appeared to wear a prettily attentive air, it is doubtful whether she heard his remarks at all. With a yet higher squirm of her shoulders and a flirt of her frilled skirts, that revealed an additional inch of fiery ancle, the serenader had begun her ditty, and politeness excused the necessity of a reply.

"Awful—isn't it?" Eileen whispered, as the first verse ended in what John mentally catalogued as a squawk. "But she *will* do it. Do you know, she spends half her time trying to get on the music-hall stage. But of course, as she has scarcely any voice, and no notion whatever of time or tune——"

The second verse had begun, and Hornecke, in the face of the general silence, was compelled to wait until its close before asking the obvious question: "Then why do you encourage her?"

"Why? Oh, of course one has to. She expects it," Eileen replied perfunctorily, wondering why John Hornecke persisted in being so tiresomely sententious. Then, before crossing the room to greet some new-comers, she delayed an instant

to whisper mischievously: "When the flame-flower has quite finished, I'll introduce you. I know you wish to talk to her!" Paying no heed to his disclaimer, she hastened off.

True to her threat, Eileen made the introduction coupling the mention of the names with the suggestion that her reluctant guardian might escort the supposedly exhausted songstress down-stairs for refreshments.

On the landing they passed Belle, engrossed in conversation with a man whose face was unfamiliar.

"Major Bryson is a *great* friend of the Flemings!" The flame damsel accompanied the remark with an arch look that made Hornecke hate her.

"Is he?"

The surly note of his laconic reply made his companion glance up with a surprise that, at least, was not affected.

"Why—yes! Everybody is talking about it. He is always here. One positively can't call without meeting him."

Remembering how long it was since he had called, Hornecke did not attempt contradiction. Wisely dropping the subject, he sought to pilot his charge to a quiet corner near the buffet. But the

flame-coloured maiden would not have benefited by the experiences of unnumbered London seasons had she failed to realise the expediency of selecting her spots. She chose a seat so placed that no one entering or leaving the room could fail to be aware of her presence. Ensconced therein, she performed the star part of the prophet Elijah, Hornecke filling the decidedly less grateful *rôle* of the ravens.

Meanwhile the flame maiden, in the intervals of feeding daintily upon microscopic sandwiches and tasteless jellies, essayed conversation of that adulatory personal nature that by a certain type of mind is imagined best to hold the interest of the interlocutor.

"Your cousins are dears, Mr. Hornecke. Doesn't Belle look simply lovely with that wreath of smilax in her golden hair? Oh! you are not cousins? I always thought you were. But there is *some* relationship—isn't there?"

Hornecke was in process of admitting—not with the best grace in the world—that his step-mother was a cousin of the Flemings' father, when he noticed Mrs. Hornecke, who had entered the supper-room attended by the man he had seen talking to Belle, trying to attract his attention.

"I'll take a glass of plain claret. No, nothing

more to eat, thank you," Mrs. Hornecke was saying when her step-son reached her side.

"Oh! John, I want to make you and Major Bryson acquainted. Major Bryson is a great friend of the girls."

Such is the innate selfishness of mankind that Hornecke instantly developed a vague antipathy for Major Bryson, who blissfully unconscious of having aroused this inimical feeling strove to ingratiate himself with his friends' guardian.

"Charming ladies, your cousins. Perfectly charming. The kind of women who always remember whether one takes sugar and cream in tea—don't you know!"

It was an innocently appreciative remark, yet John Hornecke's budding antipathy promptly resolved itself into a sturdy aversion.

The two good things attendant upon the Flemings' evening parties, according to their guardian, were that they began late and ended early. Some odd sense of standing *in loco parentis* to the sisters induced him to endure the occasion to the end. Yet it was not much later than midnight when the hired brougham deposited the Horneckes at their own door.

"Well, I suppose Bella and Ellen Fleming will

count this night another of their social triumphs!" Mrs. Hornecke remarked testily, as she secretly loosened a straining hook in her waistbelt. "I don't know the condition of their other guests, but all I can say is that I am tired out and starving. The first look of the supper-table was lovely, till you discovered there was nothing to eat. What sensible folks with a respect for their digestions care to sup off sour jellies or flabby blancmanges? I tried to eat something labelled 'salmon sandwiches'—experience should have taught me better, I know, but when it is so hot one can eat nothing during the day, and has to make up for it at night—and I'm certain it was made out of tinned salmon eked out with sliced cucumber, and a sprinkling of vinegar and cayenne. After that I thought it better to wait till we got home and I could get something eatable. If they had only had sense enough to provide a plate of plain bread and butter!"

Perhaps it was fortunate that whatever the opinion of their guests might be, the hostesses had no doubt regarding the success of their party. Out of the two hundred people invited nearly eighty had come, and considering that it was the fag end of the London season, and that they had no special attractions to offer, that number might be accounted

a good percentage, and one that afforded the givers of the entertainment ample cause for self-gratulation.

The hall-door was closed and bolted behind the last of the guests. Two of Mrs. Hornecke's maids, lent for the evening to assist in the ladies' cloak-room and in the buffet, had, under the escort of the accommodating footman, returned to Winton Square. The charwoman engaged to help the aged cook to wash up down-stairs had departed by way of the area gate, the richer by half-a-crown, and sundry fragments of the feast.

In the deserted dining-room amid a litter of wrecked viands Belle and Eileen were devouring a scrappy meal.

"I'm glad we didn't open all the Horneckes' claret." Belle was ladling the remains of the claret-cup into two tumblers. "It is such a good quality I wouldn't have wasted it in cup if Aunt Hornecke hadn't insisted. Any cheap sort would have done quite as well. But even as it is, we have two bottles to keep in reserve for some special occasion."

Eileen who, with a protecting apron tied over her pretty frock, was kneeling by the sideboard packing away the remaining iced cakes in a tin biscuit-box,

turned sharply at the conscious note in her sister's voice.

"And is there likely to be any special occasion?"

"Um—Major Bryson asked if I would be at home to-morrow at three."

"I see." Eileen's carefully dressed head nodded oracularly. "Well, I'm afraid I must deny him the pleasure of a sight of me. It will take some hard work in the morning to get things put straight, and in the afternoon I mean to indulge myself in a real good lazy rest. So I trust Major Bryson will not break his heart over my absence!"

"But—." Her tone indicated a sudden lowering of spirits. "I'm afraid he won't be the only visitor to-morrow, Belle. John Hornecke said he wished to see us on business, and would call at noon. I wonder what he wants now."

"What a tiresome creature he is! Always wanting to interfere. I do wish he would leave us to manage our own affairs!"

So that night in the dreams of the Misses Make-Believe the shadow of John Hornecke's prospective visit was cast over the sunshine of Major Bryson's promised call.

## CHAPTER V

### Two Foolish Virgins

It is only just to acknowledge that John Hornecke regarded the coming interview with even less complaisance than did the headstrong women, towards whom the will of their dead father had placed him under the obligation of acting the ungrateful and, after the first few months, almost passive part of adviser.

Sir James Fleming had been a clever physician, who, through some lucky chance of propinquity, having cured a minor Royalty of some simple ailment; or perhaps from having taken a prominent official share in the opening of a new hospital; or through some other equally fortuitous fashion having had his name mentioned in a public capacity, had been rewarded by a knighthood. It was a dignity that astonished even a community whose surprise at the apparently haphazard bestowal of like honours has grown chronic, and one that the recipient did not live long to enjoy.

Mingled with his daughters' sincere grief at his demise, was a poignant regret that their mother had predeceased the acquirement of the title. For though able to refer to "our dear father Sir James," the limitations of strict veracity forbade their bestowing posthumous rank upon their mother.

When Sir James Fleming rejoined his wife, he left behind a clean reputation; a fashionable practice—but one that had suffered considerably during the months of illness that preceded his death,—certain good old-fashioned furniture; the remaining seven years of the lease of a house in a smart locality, and a few hundred pounds in cash at his bankers.

Shortly before his death he had invested a substantial sum in the purchase of an annuity of £350, on the joint lives of his two daughters. The investment he made shortly after learning from a trio of his medical *confrères* the very serious nature of the malady from which he was suffering.

His professional library Sir James bequeathed to a hospital, that somewhat grudgingly made room for it on its already crowded bookshelves.

The trustees he appointed were two old friends, and a young one in whose judgment he had absolute confidence—John Hornecke. One of those

named having declined to accept office, and the other having died soon after the testator, Hornecke had speedily found himself filling the post of sole monitor to two young ladies who, being both of age—Belle was twenty-three, Eileen just over twenty-one—and in a position to do so, had resolutely ignored his advice.

In Hornecke's opinion, three hundred and fifty pounds a year, in conjunction with the interest from the money likely to be derived from the sale of the practice, and that obtainable by the disposal of the remainder of the lease of the house in Half Down Street, would provide an income sufficient for the support of two women, who had no need to maintain anything but the most modest of establishments. Supported at first by his fellow-trustee, he had strongly advocated the immediate sale of the lease of the house in Mayfair; but that sensible step, to his annoyance, was one the orphans were determined not to take.

To this day he remembered the interview Belle and Eileen—they were Bella and Ellen while their father was alive to add the makeweight of commonsense to the family wits—in their brand-new mourning, plaintive but dogged in their resistance of any suggestion of alteration in their mode of living.

"It is such an advantage to sit rent-free, to know that the house is our own," Eileen had said. "And father got such a bargain of the lease, that it is really an economy to remain," chimed in her sister.

"But the ground-rent and the taxes—you know how absurdly high they are in this quarter. I can assure you they will take a big bite out of your income."

"Removals are so troublesome and so costly. And we could never find an inexpensive house in a district we could possibly live in."

"Then there is the up-keep of the building to consider," Hornecke was praying for patience. "Remember the lease is running to an end now; and you are certain to be assessed heavily for dilapidations at its close. Seven years may seem a long time to look forward to, but it soon slips past."

"It would have grieved dear father dreadfully, if he had known you would try to turn us out of our home whenever he had gone." Belle had melted into aggrieved tones. "As if it wasn't bad enough for us to have lost him. I think it most cruel and unkind of you to insist upon changes that I'm sure he never anticipated."

"But don't you understand that Sir James kept up a house in this locality solely for the sake of his

practice?" To the lugubrious accompaniment of Belle's sobbing, Hornecke strove to speak as gently as possible. "Now that there are no professional interests to consider, surely a smaller house in a less expensive neighborhood would be more suitable?"

"But if we did remove, we could never get this furniture into a smaller house!" Eileen had exclaimed, as though advancing an unanswerable argument.

The discussion had been held in the sombre dining-room. Glancing round the cumbersome mahogany and morocco furniture that took up so much floor-space, and made endless dust-traps on the heavy Turkish carpet; at the elaborate old-fashioned grate the polishing of whose brass and steel entailed so many hours of hard labour; and at the rich purple curtains that kept out the light,—at that moment one was making a charming background for Eileen's slender sable-clad figure,—Hornecke marvelled that women should elect to go through life, with the burden of a houseful of lumbering old furniture on their backs.

"If you take my advice,—and Mr. Mason asked me to say that in his opinion also, it will be the wisest step to take,—you will pick out all the furni-

ture you require to furnish a snug little house, and sell the rest. You'd get enough from the sale of what you didn't require, to fit you up in a house where your income would be ample, as your father meant that it should, and as it ought to be."

But the girls were resolute in rejecting their guardian's well-intentioned proposals. Evidently they had already discussed the matter, and joined forces to resist him.

"If we left here and took a little house at West Kensington, or some other dreadfully out-of-the-world place," sobbed Belle, "we would lose all our friends; for of course we couldn't possibly expect people to come so far to see us."

At Hornecke's straightforward intimation that the friendship of their friends was not worth having if a mere exchange of district had power to destroy it, Eileen flushed hotly. Angry sniffs usurped the place of Belle's tears, and, irritated into disapproving silence, Hornecke had dropped the subject.

A few days later he had received a semi-propitiatory letter written by Eileen which stated that, in accordance with his suggestion, they had been looking at flats with a view to removal, but that any they had seen were ridiculously expensive.

The cheapest they had found—quite a small one, too, and on the wrong side of the Park—was £170. But even it was so very tiny that, if they did take it, none of the furniture or fittings would be of any use. So that Belle and she, after much careful calculation, had decided that it would be more economical to remain as they were. Besides, they had resolved to add to their resources by letting the house furnished whenever they went out of town. In any case, she added, they would keep their eyes open, and if they did chance to see a suitable house at a moderate rent would reconsider the subject.

The years that had elapsed since he voiced his first unavailing protest had gradually taught John Hornecke to cease giving advice that went unheeded.

Mr. Mason was dead, and the younger man's suggestions regarding the investment of the sum realised by their late father's practice had been received with the same short-sighted feminine obstinacy. The three and a half per cent interest he advised they had flouted as too small, deciding to let the money remain on deposit at their bankers' until a more tempting investment turned up. And Hornecke, having no real warrant for interference, succeeded only in exacting a promise that they would

not invest the capital without previously consulting him.

The only excuse for their folly—if excuse it can be counted—lay in their knowledge that in the opinion of the Flemings' wholly material circle only one's actual worldly possessions counted. Another thing experience had taught them, was that at no time is the apparent expenditure of a household so keenly scrutinised as immediately after the death of the bread-winner.

Then the slightest sign of retrenchment is met by loud-voiced pity, and instant loss of caste. And it was against this fancied degradation that the girls had fought so strenuously.

"No matter what it costs us, we must try to keep the position father gained for us," Belle had said. "It is hateful of John Hornecke to try to make us give up everything, and go to live in that common way."

So their hall-door was still opened by a man-servant, though the place of the omnipresent British butler of Sir James's day was most inadequately filled by a callow Swiss or German, who, in his eagerness to acquire the English language, was willing to clean windows, knives, boots, do half the work of a parlour-maid, and all the work of an

indoor man, for scanty board and a wage that might more accurately be described as a "honorarium."

It was a long time before any member of the Flemings' large circle of acquaintance discovered that at No. 27, Half Down Street, no housemaid was kept, or guessed that the ladies of the house, their plain morning frocks shrouded in huge aprons, their fashionably-dressed hair protected by mob-caps, their white hands shielded by chamois gloves, made beds, swept, dusted, polished, and between them shared the labour of the absentee housemaid. When through course of time the matter leaked out, as was inevitable, it proved a prime factor in earning them the soubriquet of the Misses Make-Believe.

Since his futile protest, John Hornecke had perforce stood aside and let the Flemings pursue their own way; and that path he found led them farther and farther into foolishness. Perhaps if he had been in the secret of their endless little contrivances to save money: if he had known what self-sacrifice they endured uncomplainingly in their efforts to sustain an appearance of affluence: if he had only guessed how they turned and remodelled their smart clothes, how they subjugated their appetites in order that their backs might be gaily attired, he

would have sympathised with their endeavours, even although their standpoint was so entirely alien to his own. As it was, the Flemings' utter disregard of Hornecke's advice, and their consciousness of his wordless disapproval, had bred between them a coldness that on both sides was fast ripening into dislike.

## CHAPTER VI

### Some Dilapidations and the Moral

"THEN I am to understand that the money you had at your bankers' is gone?"

"It was our own money, John. Father left it to us unconditionally. Surely we were free to use it as we thought best? And even if we have spent it, I'm certain nobody else could have got better value for it than we have done," argued Belle Fleming with inconsequent heat.

The gloomily anticipated interview was proving to the full as trying as the three reluctant participants had feared.

Retaining a vivid recollection of that former business discussion wherein his advice had so persistently been set aside, John Hornecke was quick to note any differences or similarities in the existing conditions.

Then, though it was November, the day had been

mild, even sunny. Now, although it was high summer, a thunderstorm in the night had cooled the torrid atmosphere to chill; and seen across the storm-battered blossoms in the window-boxes, the wet streets added to the note of depression.

Eileen, he noticed, occupied her former seat. But the rich mauve plush curtains that had made so becoming a background for her dark head had given place to the lace draperies of summer. Viewed against the severity of the cold light, she looked fagged, almost old. Even her hair, which used to be bright and crisp, appeared dull and lifeless. It seemed no time since she was a pretty dimpled little schoolgirl and a special friend of his own. To-day she seemed world-worn and sad, and there was no love lost between them, as Hornecke acknowledged heavily.

"I feared you might be encroaching on your capital, but I trusted not to any great extent. Have you forgotten that you promised not to invest the money without first letting me know?"

"But we used the money. We didn't invest it." argued Belle, still illogical. "And Eileen and I are not children, John Hornecke. I really don't see what right you have to come here and bully us like this." Supported by her intuitive assurance

of Major Bryson's matrimonial intention, Miss Fleming felt in a position openly to defy her guardian.

"I ask solely in your own interests. As you know, the lease of this house falls in within the next few months. And you cannot fail to remember that, when you decided to remain here, I warned you that at the close of the lease a heavy claim might be made in respect of the inevitable dilapidations?"

Turning from her over-strung sister, Hornecke had addressed his interrogatory remark to Eileen, who silently nodded acquiescence.

"It was the anticipation of that demand that made me ask you not to invest the money without my knowledge."

"But we didn't speculate with it, John. We only spent it when it was absolutely necessary. And you know father meant it for our use."

Though Eileen's tone was less aggressive than Belle's, to her guardian's disappointment her words revealed that she shared the same distorted views. Realising the futility of attempting to explain things to listeners who refuse to understand, Hornecke passed on to another point.

"Well then, tell me—what condition is the house

in? Have you put out any money on it lately—done any papering and painting, for instance?"

With some hesitation it was acknowledged that the hall was the only part that had been re-decorated since the present occupants came into possession.

"The hall simply *had* to be done." Belle spoke as though in extenuation of the expenditure. "It was so dreadfully dingy, and the paint was such a hideous color. No one entering the house could help noticing it. The rooms are frightfully shabby too, but we can hide that by keeping the blinds low when anybody calls."

Without reply, Hornecke made a note: "Entire re-decoration required," and passed on to the next subject.

"What about the state of the roof? Do you know if it is watertight?"

"I'm afraid not very," Eileen acknowledged, conscience-smitten with the recollection of the long-standing leak that during any heavy rainfall necessitated the placing of a row of basins in the empty attic. "In wet weather some rain drips in. And there is a chimney-pot off," she added, urged thereto by a desire to get the inquisition over. "One was blown down in that big storm in March.

We always meant to have it replaced, but somehow—"

"As there never is a fire in that chimney, it really did not matter," chimed in Belle. "And besides, we grudged the money."

"Then about the building generally. Will much be required to put it into tolerable repair?"

But on that point the ladies were obliged to confess utter ignorance.

"Um. Entire overhaul: fresh decoration: reslating of roof: new chimney-pots. I am afraid the claim may be a trifle heavy. What we must consider now is how it is to be met. I am sorry to return to the question of money again, but unfortunately it must be faced if we are to decide anything about the matter. How much have you left in actual coin?"

With an angry spot burning fiercely on either cheek, Miss Fleming acknowledged that there was only about sixty pounds remaining to their credit at the bank.

"Sixty pounds." Hornecke's quiet tone spoke his disapproval more strongly than mere words could have done. "Are there many household accounts to pay off that sum?"

"No. Almost none. We never ran in debt,

John." Belle felt they were not getting credit for the virtue they had shown. "The livery-stables bill will be due on Friday—that is the end of the month. And there are the servants' wages to pay, and I think something to the dentist. Nothing else to speak of."

Hornecke made a further note—"Only enough money in hand to meet current expenses"—and felt impelled to ask a trenchant question.

"What did you mean to do when your capital was gone?"

The question asked so bluntly was hard to answer. What unmarried lady, however badly cornered, will willingly confess to an unimaginative unsympathetic man that it was the will-o'-the-wisp of marriage that led her on and on into the bog of unwarranted expenditure? Nor would she acknowledge that from month to month the vague hope aroused by some apparently congenial acquaintance and fostered by some trivial attention had induced her to wade farther into the morass in the belief that a suitable marriage might set her firmly upon solid ground. Tackled on so delicate a subject, assuredly neither Belle nor Eileen Fleming could be reasonably expected to give anything but an evasive reply.

"We knew we would always have our annuity," Belle said, a little defiantly, as though to suggest that even he could not deprive them of that.

"I'm sure *I* shall be glad when all this pinching and contriving is over. I am sick tired of trying to appear richer than I really am."

The catch in Eileen's voice made John glance at her with a sudden revulsion to pity. For the first time it occurred to him that the *rôle* enacted by the Misses Make-Believe might not have been either an easy or a pleasant one.

"Well, I will find out as quickly as I can the likely extent of the claim for dilapidations, and shall make arrangements for meeting it. Meanwhile I am sure you will agree that the surest way to begin economising is to leave this house at once?"

With his words Belle flushed hotly, and opened her lips as though to protest; but she closed them without a word. A frequently repeated maxim of Major Bryson's, which chose that most untimely moment to obtrude itself, was to the effect that if you tied a rope a mile long to a pillar at Hyde Park Corner and drew it round in a circle you would enclose the entire radius of his visiting. If they left their present house in Mayfair, how could they ever

afford to take another within the charmed limit of the Major's toleration?

Eileen, swift to read her sister's unspoken thought, replied for her.

"Could you defer making any final arrangement for a few days, John? If so, I think possibly a more satisfactory—disposal may be come to."

Eileen's slight hesitation over the word conveyed to her hearer a suggestion of her meaning. Remembering the allusions of both his step-mother and the flame maiden to Major Bryson's intimacy with the household, Hornecke believed he understood. Noting a certain significance in his look, and guessing his thought, Eileen blushed—for a yet unspoken proposal of marriage is a delicate matter even to hint at—and by doing so unwittingly encouraged his misconception of her meaning.

"As you think there is a chance of a happier settlement," Hornecke said a little stiffly, rising to his feet and pocketing his note-book,—signs that he considered the interview ended,—"I will gladly let the matter lie in abeyance for a few days."

His tone failed to reveal the pleasure his words expressed. When a man has taken a stern resolve to exert himself to extricate women out of difficulties, he rarely welcomes the notion that circum-

stances may render them independent of his assistance.

"How long do you think it may be before this advantageous 'disposal' is arrived at?" he asked of Eileen, who accompanied him to the door.

"Oh, quite soon. *Very* soon—" a glance at the hall-clock had reminded her that in less than two hours the Major's visit was due. "Indeed," she added, with a little burst of confidence, "perhaps we may be able to let you know to-morrow!"

## CHAPTER VII

### The Ungallant Major

THEIR dread inquisitor gone, and a brief respite accordingly gained, the sisters lunched scrappily on the remains of the previous night's feast. Their determined habit of resolutely looking at the brilliant possibilities of the future, and as resolutely ignoring its gloomy probabilities, enabled them almost cheerfully to anticipate the arrival of Major Bryson in the character of the Knight of Distressed Damsels.

Luncheon over, Eileen returned to rest on the weather-beaten couch in the back sitting-room, a chamber sacred to their economies of dressmaking and millinery. She had provided herself with a novel, but was too excited with the past interview, and too anxious regarding the outcome of the impending one, to feel inclined either to sleep or to read.

Belle having exchanged the flabby morning dress that she had pronounced "good enough for John

Hornecke," for her freshest and most becoming tea-gown, and having satisfied herself that she had made the very most of her charms, gave strict instructions to the man-servant that she was "at home" only to Major Bryson. Then she settled herself in the drawing-room with a carefully arranged background of flowers and harmoniously tinted cushions, to await the coming of her visitor; who, it must be admitted, was not quite punctual. The Major, when he did arrive a quarter of an hour late, referred to the cause of delay as "an unavoidable detention."

Belle did not guess that Major Bryson's expenditure was so carefully calculated that, rather than spend an unnecessary shilling on cab-hire, he had waited until the rain ceased. Had her home been two miles distant instead of a bare quarter of a mile, the Major would have had no hesitation in hiring. To secure the use of a hansom for a two-mile journey on a rainy day he would have esteemed a worthy return for the investment of a shilling. But the disbursement of a like coin for a drive of an eighth of that distance he would have considered sheer rank folly.

Of this, Belle Fleming—feeling a little chilly in her airy chiffons and laces as she waited in the big

drawing-room—had no suspicion. Her mental picture of the future had gradually come to show the Major as her heroic deliverer from the ignominy of public retrenchment. That he had only to learn her position to fly to the rescue she firmly believed. In her secret heart she had—in the absence of any evidence to the contrary—credited him with a large private income. It would have amazed her and would, I fear, have destroyed her faith in mankind, had she known that in his efforts to sustain an appearance of affluence, Major Bryson laboured almost as hard as she had done.

When he held her hand and murmured vague apologies for his lack of punctuality, Belle found herself mentally contrasting the polished urbanity of his manner with her guardian's brusqueness.

For a time they talked over last night's party. That topic exhausted, the conversation flagged. Except under the influence of genuine passion no man who has remained a bachelor until of mature years contemplates the plunge into matrimony without a certain natural hesitation. For the moment the Major held back, trying to conceal his momentary reluctance by introducing minor subjects of conversation, in place of that they both had at heart and for which Belle so eagerly waited.

"The season is nearly ended. I suppose you will be going away soon?" he said at last.

"Yes. We must leave here soon. Very soon." Tears of self-pity rose to Belle's eyes with the knowledge of all that admission meant.

"I shall miss you dreadfully. You don't know how much it has been to me to be able to drop in here." Regret for his own prospective loneliness lent a genuinely pathetic note to Major Bryson's voice. "When do you think of leaving town, and when will you return?"

As he asked the question he had taken a place on the couch beside her, and his hand touched Belle's as it lay by her side.

"I don't know when we're going. I only know that we will never, never come back here again," blurted out poor Belle, the guard of self-interest broken down under the tenderness of his tone.

"What do you mean?" With the first danger-signal the sentimental note was fading from his voice. The hand that rested upon hers had lessened its pressure. "You are not thinking of leaving London, surely?"

"I don't know when we are going or where. John Hornecke was here this morning—you know he is a kind of trustee of Eileen's and mine?—and

he warned us that in a few months when the lease of this house falls in, we must leave Half Down Street, and go somewhere where we can only live in a dreadfully common way."

An uncalculating feminine desire to confide her woes in one she esteems stronger than herself—the craving for masculine support that, leading to undue confidence, has wrecked many a woman's life—urged Belle on. In her agitation, oblivious that Major Bryson sat a little more upright in his corner of the sofa, and that his hand had imperceptibly slipped away from hers, she still foolishly believed that she had only to tell her troubles to gain his complete sympathy.

But the confession that Belle had anticipated sobbing out on his breast was made not to a disinterested lover but to a calculating self-seeking one who, while he listened with apparent grave attention, was inwardly thanking all his gods that the irrevocable question had not yet been put; for had he asked Belle Fleming to marry him, as he had come with every intention of doing, all the laws that govern the social system would have forbidden his retracting.

After a circumscribed stay, during which he offered many condolences and some nebulous offers of assistance of the stereotyped—"You know how

greatly I feel for you. Is there anything I can do? Do please let me know if I can possibly be of any use,"—order, the Major departed.

The rain had ceased, but even had it not, there was now no question of taking or not taking a hansom. A man who by a providential chance has just avoided a step that he is convinced would have plunged him in monetary ruin, does not pause to count his shillings.

Within ten minutes of leaving the Flemings' drawing-room, Major Bryson was ensconced in a quiet corner of his club smoking-room, a trifle breathless and somewhat palpitating about the heart, as would be any bachelor who had narrowly escaped parting with his liberty without receiving adequate recompense.

Still it is due to the ungallant Major to note that his self-gratulation was mingled with, and considerably marred by, a certain uncomfortable sensation which, in the case of one whose feelings were more easily analysed, might almost have been accounted shame.

As for Belle, her recreant lover gone, she sat alone, feeling as though great waters had gone over her artificially-goldened head, until Eileen—having first cautiously ascertained from the footman that it

really was Major Bryson whom she had heard leave the house—peeped into the drawing-room.

"Well?" she queried playfully.

"Oh, Nell, Nell! It's all over. He's gone, and he'll never come back again. I know he won't," Belle burst out passionately, as her sister took the seat the renegade wooer had left, and tenderly captured the hand he had abandoned.

"But I thought he had come to ask you to marry him."

"I think he had. Yes, I'm *sure* he had. But I told him everything. All about our money, and what John Hornecke said this morning. Yes, *everything*. And he just went away. Oh, yes! of course he was very *polite* and nice," she replied in answer to her sister's inquiry. "But I could tell we fell at once in his estimation. That we would never rank with him again."

"Then he said nothing about——"

"No, not a word. I think he was going to, for he began to say . . . . . Oh! what a fool I was to tell him. Don't you think I was an unutterable fool to tell him how we were situated?"

"No. I don't think you were." Eileen spoke thoughtfully in answer to the half-hysterical outburst. "Indeed I *know* you acted wisely. Suppose

Major Bryson had asked you to marry him to-day while in ignorance of our change of circumstance and you had accepted him, it would only have been delaying the evil hour. He would have had to be told all about it to-morrow. And then, being the man he has proved himself to be, he would have had a splendid excuse for wriggling out of the engagement. While if he had been an honourable man who would have kept to his word, he could not have helped feeling defrauded, and you would have felt mean and hateful in deceiving him."

But Belle was hardly yet in that state of mental quietude necessary for the cool consideration of a subject so greatly affecting her personal well-being. She shivered nervously, her hands were cold, her head hot.

"But Karl must not see you like this." Habit forced Eileen unconsciously to play the old game of make-believe. "Come up-stairs and lie down, and I'll bring you up a cup of tea. We will be 'out' to everybody."

"It doesn't matter whether we are in or out. Nobody will come to see us now," Belle said forlornly as, hand in hand, they climbed the stairs. "We may make up our minds to be old maids."

"I don't care a bachelor's button whether they

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do or not. I'd rather be an honest, independent spinster living on twopence a year than be indebted for anything to a mere man," cried Eileen valiantly. But in her heart of hearts she knew that she lied.

Looking back, and carefully examining each motive in the light of bitter experience, resolutely refusing to allow her treacherous memory to uphold meritorious actions while keeping the less praiseworthy out of sight, but sedulously analysing each individual step that led to their present humiliation, Eileen Fleming decided that vanity and false pride alone lay at the root of their downfall.

The unspoken expectation of marriage had, as face to face with her naked soul Eileen was forced to acknowledge, been a chief factor in their foolish outlay. In common with most English girls of corresponding station, Belle and Eileen Fleming had grown up with the notion that marriage was the goal towards which their daintily-shod feet were necessarily tending.

Perhaps the idea was only natural. At the time of Sir James Fleming's death his daughters were young, good-looking, and by no means penniless. Assuredly the most natural conclusion was that both would speedily marry.

From the time when their schooldays ended, the

sisters had, subconsciously, regarded every unwed man they met who was not impecunious, infirm, or aged, as a vague though possible element in her future.

During the years that succeeded Sir James's death, Belle at least had held herself in readiness, at the shortest notice, to fill the part of *fiancée*, merely as stepping-stone to the more important office of wife, to any eligible man in her own class of life that might have presented himself.

Eileen's somewhat deeper nature demanded a higher standard. While she was in her early twenties, John Hornecke, brusque, sincere, plain-featured, who had been the hero of her girlhood, was displaced by a man in every way his antithesis.

It was soon after her father's death, before the discovery of their secret household economies had earned the sisters the soubriquet of the Misses Make-Believe, and while their handsome mourning still gave the impression of well-salved woe, that the newly inducted curate of St. Aloysius', cast a predatory eye upon Eileen Fleming.

The Reverend Ernest Percival was a youth possessed of boundless energies, a handsome face and figure, a glib tongue, a keen eye for the main chance,

and a determination to make use of every step that would enable him to rise in his profession.

Feeling a craving for greater home comforts than his modest stipend afforded, or his dingy lodgings supplied, and fully aware that a man suitably wedded wields twice the influence of a bachelor, he cast an appraising eye round the congregation, and after much secret weighing of possible claims and deliberate mental balancing of the rival attractions of divers damsels, finally decided that Eileen Fleming would prove the most desirable helpmeet.

Eileen was young, attractive, and an orphan of independent means. Sir James Fleming had taken a leading part in the affairs of St. Aloysius', and had contributed liberally to its funds, and the calculating curate was duly impressed by the fact that his demise had necessitated little outward change in the family circumstances.

Calling at Half Down Street, he found the manservant imposing, and the knowledge that the sisters still retained the use of a carriage he accepted as almost conclusive evidence that their joint income was considerable. Small wonder then that his attentions became more and more insistent.

Something of either gratified vanity or of latent hero-worship, lies at the root of all " falling in love."

Eileen Fleming's passion partook of both elements. She was naturally flattered to find herself exalted above the many other maidens who attended St. Aloysius'. And what more suitable hero could have been enshrined in the vacant niche in her heart than the good-looking young clergyman with the pensive blue eyes and the persuasive voice, who brought to his wooing that magnetic enthusiasm that proved his chief allurement in the pulpit.

Eileen was merely human. She allowed the image of Percival to usurp more and more of her thoughts. There came a season when she would rather attend a service at St. Aloysius' than a dance anywhere else; when the Reverend Ernest Percival declared that were their pew empty the service was to him a blank. Then came a day when, but for an unlucky chance,—one of those inadvertencies that so frequently seem to govern our lives,—he would have made known the trend of his thoughts.

The occasion was an afternoon "At Home," the first formal reception the girls had given since their father's death. Fired with the courage of his intention, the swain had brushed his fair hair more sleekly than ever. He had perfumed his clerical dress—which was designed accurately to express the exact height, breadth, and depth of his sacerdotal

beliefs—with lavender-water, selecting that chaste essence as being more refined and less sensuous than any other.

He had arrived in admirable time, not too early, —one so skilled in social observancies is careful to avoid the *gaucherie* of being the earliest guest,— resolved to put his fortune to the test before leaving the house.

It was Eileen Fleming herself, though a beneficent providence prevented her ever guessing it, who all unwittingly led to the frustration of his resolve. For in the exercise of her duty as hostess she asked him to escort Mrs. Witterden, a matronly member of his congregation, to the tea-room.

The Reverend Ernest, murmuring that any service rendered to Miss Eileen was a pleasure, tripped gracefully off to offer his arm to Mrs. Witterden, who sat in a corner of the drawing-room wearing that expression of extreme disapproval which many dames appear to reserve for the attempts of their friends to entertain them. Mrs. Witterden, who was the parent of several marriageable daughters (one of whom cherished a hopeless passion for Mr. Percival), made use of the opportunity to take a vicarious revenge on her hostess for her possession of superior attractions.

Hers was one of the many crimes committed under the sacred name of motherhood, though Mrs. Witterden sought to justify her action and mollify her conscience by assuring herself that it would have been a sin to permit the curate to become entangled with Eileen Fleming while under any misapprehension as to the real state of her finances.

Her tactics were masterly. As she entered the dining-room, Mrs. Witterden remarked, with a sniff, that the room was not so large as one would have expected. As she selected a cucumber sandwich she deplored the loss of Sir James, and wondered a little if he would have *quite* approved of his daughters living without a chaperon.

With her second cup of tea and a chocolate *éclair,* she whispered confidentially that it was astonishing how they could do it. That of course, being a special friend of the Flemings, Mr. Percival would know exactly how they had been left. That personally she thought it simply amazing how the poor girls managed. That—with a sudden change to reserve—she saw she had been indiscreet in assuming that her hearer was in her hostesses' confidence: that it had been injudicious of her even to hint . . . But that those who knew the contents of the late Sir James Fleming's will, and compared

it with the way his daughters lived . . . Here Mrs. Witterden became rigidly discreet, having successfully acted the part of a malignant blight upon Eileen's flowers of hope that a moment before had blossomed so sweetly.

Mr. Percival did not linger long at the party. Soon after escorting Mrs. Witterden back to the drawing-room, he made his excuses and hastened away. Next morning saw him take a journey—one that he never cared to remember—to Somerset House, where by payment of a shilling he secured the privilege of a perusal of Sir James Fleming's will.

The Reverend Ernest Percival, thanks to the teaching of his father, one of a firm of provincial solicitors, was better informed on monetary matters than many of his clerical *confrères*. Taking out his neat note-book, he jotted down the various items —annuity so much, lease of house, etc. It required only a little study to convince one so astute as he that the cost of the Flemings' living could not be met by their income; that they must be intrenching upon their slender capital.

To say that he abandoned his matrimonial intention without a certain amount of suffering would not be true. Eileen was pretty and charming, she

loved him, and, as far as his calculating nature permitted, he was genuinely fond of her. It was difficult to meet her trustful glance during service and not to respond with a look of devotion, as he had been wont. Fnding the flesh weak, he adopted a wise, if not a valiant, course, and ran away. On the plea of delicate health he obtained his rector's consent to taking a long holiday. Soon after his return, six weeks later, the membership of St. Aloysius' was increased by the acquisition of a rich widow, whose acquaintance the curate had made at Biarritz, and who, during the following year, became Mrs. Ernest Percival.

What Eileen endured no one but herself knew. When Belle had a woe, whether it proceeded from an unbecoming dress, a sore heart, or an aching tooth, she cried aloud for the sympathy of her little world. Eileen was differently constituted. The knowledge of other people's pity would only have made her hurt the more grievous, her anguish the harder to bear.

Belle might have guessed; but at that moment, as it chanced, Belle's whole thoughts were absorbed in self-commiseration. A young naval officer, several months her junior, with whom she had flirted a little the previous summer, had been accidentally

killed; and Belle Fleming, who loved to drape the veil of sentiment over even the slightest of her flirtations, accounted herself heart-broken, to the exclusion of her interest in all else.

So in silence Eileen bore her heavy burden. If, in those days of heart-bitterness that she lived through alone, she lost something of her girlish gaiety, if her cheek lost its colour, her figure its roundness: if a deeper shade framed her grey eyes and her red lips took a slight downward curve, none but John Hornecke noticed any difference; and even he ascribed the change to the artificial life he believed she led, and merely disapproved of her the more.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Wanted—A Home

THE visit of a young lady to the offices of Hornecke, Bowcas and Hornecke, Adjusters of Averages—the firm of which John Hornecke was junior partner—was an infrequent occurrence. So when next morning Eileen called, her guardian, who had not anticipated seeing her, astonished the clerk who brought in her card by first colouring confusedly and then by involuntarily passing a smoothing hand over his hair before instructing him to show the lady in. These little matters betrayed to the clerk that his employer, whom he had hitherto regarded as impervious to feminine influence, was human like unto himself.

In spite of Hornecke's rooted disapproval of what he esteemed his wards' foolish extravagance in dress—he shared the common male delusion that gaily-hued raiment necessarily costs more than garb of duller tone—it gratified him, in a way he would have scorned to own, to notice that when Eileen

invaded his private room she wore a pretty summer frock, and that the little straw hat that perched so nattily on her dark head was flower-decked. He did not guess that before setting out on her journey citywards, Eileen had regretted her lack of the sober garments she was certain he would have approved of!

"Belle did not feel very well this morning, so I came alone, John." Eileen lost no time in entering on the subject of her visit, "yesterday when you called for us you may remember I hinted that there might be a pleasant way out of our troubles?" Her lips quivered ominously. What she had come to say was not easy to put in words.

"Yes?" Hornecke affected to be interested in the carved letter-opener he held.

"Well, I came this morning to tell you that I'm afraid—indeed, I know—that we must not count upon that. It is 'off,' as boys say." She was trying to speak lightly. "So if you will advise us regarding what is best to do, we shall be very greatly obliged."

Then, after all, Eileen was not going to be married. Confirmed old bachelor though he believed himself to be, Hornecke was conscious of a throb of something like relief, that came with the knowl-

edge that he and he alone would be the Flemings' adviser.

"There should really be very little difficulty about the matter. The moment you consent to quit your present house, your expenses should lessen. The dilapidation claim need not trouble you. I shall arrange about that. And your joint annuity is sufficient to keep you in moderate comfort."

Eileen leant forward, her grey eyes full of question.

"Does that mean that you will advance the money for us?"

"Um—well, yes. It is better that any claim should be met without much delay. Of course, I shall see that it is compressed within as moderate limits as possible."

"We shall pay you back—every penny; and as soon as possible too, John, I promise you that," Eileen was saying earnestly, when a tap came to the door and a clerk entered with a card in his hand.

Engaged!" Hornecke said, with annoyed emphasis.

But Eileen had already risen to her feet.

"I must not detain you any longer. It was good of you to see me at such a busy hour of the day."

"Plenty of time—sit down," he insisted with

brusque kindness. "It is a long time since you were last here."

Both involuntarily smiled, then grew sad, as they recalled that last visit, which had occurred during a long-ago Christmas vacation. Belle had been invited to a juvenile party, and Eileen, who was younger, left out. Hornecke, the confidant of her childish troubles, learning of her disappointment, invited Eileen to become his guest for a day in the City. Calling early in a hansom, he bore her off to view the glories of the Tower, the Mint, the Monument, and St. Paul's; then after luncheon at the "Blue Anchor," they spent an enraptured afternoon at Drury Lane Pantomime.

"That was a happy day. We were both younger then, John." There was a suspicion of moisture in Eileen's eyes as she smiled. "But I must go. Belle will be imagining I am lost, and we'll have heaps of things to discuss if we are going to remove soon."

"She was almost like her old self again," Hornecke mused when she had gone. And "Now, if only John Hornecke would be as nice always as he was to-day," thought Eileen as she sought the nearest entrance to the Underground. "I felt almost inclined to tell him all about Major Bryson. But

I'm rather glad I didn't. It would hardly have been fair to Belle."

On reaching home, cheered by the conviction that however much their guardian disapproved of them, he would not desert them in time of trouble, Eileen was surprised to find the invalid, whom she had left disconsolate in bed, dressed and in the dining-room, where she was busily engaged filling little silver dishes with the cakes left from their evening party.

"Why, Belle! What are you doing here? You know you ought to be in bed."

Miss Fleming raised a woe-begone face which contrasted oddly with her elaborately waved and plaited crown of fair hair.

"Have you forgotten that this is our 'at home' afternoon?" she asked wearily. "People are certain to call."

"Oh, bother! I had quite forgotten. Can't Karl say we are out?"

"Impossible. Everybody will expect us to receive. Besides, someone we wouldn't like to miss might come. And you know Karl is no distinguisher of persons."

"But you are fagged out. And I wanted a long quiet chat. There are endless things to plan."

"What did John Hornecke say?" Belle, who was adulterating the cream with milk, found time to inquire.

"Oh, he was quite nice. Yes, really *quite* nice. You would have been surprised. He says he will advance any money that may be required for the dilapidations. But he thinks—indeed, he insists—that the sooner we leave here the better. The question is, where are we to go?"

"I don't care where we go. What does it matter to anyone? Who cares whether we go or stay? Not a living soul," Belle retorted bitterly.

Eileen's sole answer was to unlock the sideboard, and, taking out one of the bottles of Hornecke claret, she poured out a glass for her sister.

"There, Belle. Drink that. It won't do to let people suspect things too soon. We must keep up appearances to the end. Everything is sure to come out, but it needn't come out while we are here to listen to the gossip. We'll put on our prettiest frocks, and make the best of things while they last."

One thought that was in both sisters' minds remained unspoken—"Would Major Bryson call?" If he did not, it would be the first of their afternoon "At Homes" that he had missed throughout the summer.

The unvoiced question answered itself within the next few hours. The Major did not come. He was not altogether a coward; but this being a matter strongly affecting his personal comfort, he funked it. Any interview with Belle under existing circumstances would be trying: a *tête-à-tête* would be a horror. So discretion being the better part of valour, Major Bryson elected to leave town for the day.

Eileen grieved for her sister, as through the long afternoon she noticed how her fugitive colour changed with every thump of the door-knocker; though she could not help admiring how, through all the tiresome chatter, Belle succeeded in maintaining her society smile and simulated interest in the conversation. She even carried her bravery the length of laying the first stepping-stone towards an altered future.

"No. We haven't yet decided where to go this autumn," Eileen heard her reply to the customary inquiry. "Eileen inclines to some of the French watering-places. But I am afraid they might be too hot. Farther north would perhaps be better. I think Marstraand would be nice, and not quite so hackneyed as Scheveningen. To tell the truth, I don't think we shall hasten back to town. We have

been talking quite seriously of spending the winter away. The London climate is so trying in the dead months. Really I don't know how we endured the dreadful fogs last Christmas!"

It was nearly six when Mrs. Hornecke bustled in, bringing a cordial invitation to dinner on the following night. Her step-son, when he reached home half an hour earlier, had given her an inkling of the Flemings' plight. And it must be acknowledged that, however trenchantly she might criticise the actions of her distant relatives, Mrs. Hornecke was ever one who hastened to show practical sympathy.

Every energetic woman loves to make plans, if not for herself for her friends and acquaintances. And who amongst us does not flatter ourselves that, were the disbursement of other people's incomes in our hands the funds would be laid out to vastly greater advantage by us than they could be by their owners?

Perhaps the desire to bestow counsel was partly accountable for the promptness of her invitation; for when the ladies had returned to the drawing-room after dinner, the following evening, Mrs. Hornecke had many suggestions to offer regarding her friends' proposed change in their method of living.

Two of her treasured ideas were instantly flouted

by Miss Fleming, who, still smarting from her wounded feelings, was sharper-tongued and less tolerant than of yore.

The first of these notions was that their best way to secure the uttermost value for their expenditure lay in becoming permanent guests at some West End boarding-house.

"I have made careful inquiry, and I find that in the case of *permanent* boarders even the best houses are willing to make a substantial reduction. One very nice establishment I looked at—it is in Ellerton Square, quite near your old locality and a liveried servant opened the door—spoke of accepting two guineas a week from permanent guests who would be content with rooms on the third floor. That would only come to two hundred and eight guineas a year, and for that you could live at ease with no housekeeping worries. They keep an excellent table. The Manageress showed me the menus of the dinner and luncheon that were served yesterday, and really they were admirable. I don't know how they can do it for the money. Your only extra outlay would be for dress, and travelling, cab-hire, and of course, laundress, and odds and ends; and of course for that the remaining hundred—odd pounds would be ample."

"I would be sick of the nicest boarding-house in the world in a week," cried ungrateful Belle; and Eileen secretly agreed with her. "Don't I know the sort of thing? The menus that at first appear such amazing value for what you pay, and after a day or two seem so hatefully stereotyped. I know the long hot dining-room whose windows are always shut because somebody feels a draught, and the horrid little back bedrooms reserved for permanent boarders. Oh! if there's anything I abhor more than another it's coming down-stairs to breakfast and having to bob my head and say "Good morning" to a host of people with whom under other circumstances I would never dream of associating!"

"Besides, two hundred a year is more than we can afford to spend on mere bed and board." Eileen spoke courageously. "Living like that, we would require to dress well. And in town many little unforeseen expenses crop up that come to quite a lot in the end. I don't want our whole outlay for everything to amount to more than two hundred a year until we have repaid John the money he is going to advance for us."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear, nonsense! John is the last man to expect that. I'm certain it would worry

him dreadfully if he anticipated that you were stinting yourselves to repay him."

But on this point was the younger sister resolved to have her own way. Belle, she knew, did not find the notion of indebtedness to their guardian so repugnant as did she; but, as long as they owed him a penny, Eileen knew that her unreasoning feminine soul would cherish a grudge against fate.

"Of course, there are many cheaper boarding-houses, and no doubt with careful inquiry you might hear of quite a comfortable place for thirty shillings or twenty-five a week; or even—" Mrs. Hornecke paused dubiously.

"Or even a guinea, or fifteen shillings! Is there no place at half-a-guinea?" Belle exclaimed bitterly.

"Or how would you care to try the country? Living is always cheap there; and I'm certain, if you didn't mind quiet, a little inquiry, or perhaps an advertisement in the *Queen*, or the *Guardian*, or some other respectable journal, might put one into communication with a family who took paying guests."

"Paying guests! 'Ah, never, never more of me'!" Belle was laughing sarcastically. "Oh, Nell, do you remember that autumn when we

wished to economise and our house was let, we arranged to spend a month in the 'refined house of the widow of a professional man' in Surrey? Do you remember the refined house?—and the widow!"

"No, Aunt Hornecke; what we really want is a home. We have kept house so long now that I don't think we could be really happy except in a home of our own. It need not be big, or fine, or smart, or indeed anything at all but a home!"

This sentiment John Hornecke, who had stayed down-stairs to smoke his after-dinner cigar, entering the room in time to hear, mentally applauded.

## CHAPTER IX

### A Journey to Flatland

THE summer was over and gone. The last week of September had come and found the Flemings no nearer a decision regarding the situation of their future home.

During August they had passed three weeks as the guests of Mrs. Hornecke at Folkestone, where, attired in their smartest dresses, they had walked or driven in the mornings, spending the torrid afternoons sitting on chairs in the sunshine listening to a Band discoursing music they scarcely heard because their sole conscious thought was a dominating longing for tea.

"I'm dying of thirst. Do I pant and does my tongue hang out?" whispered Eileen one sultry afternoon when their hostess was dozing placidly under the shelter of her capacious sunshade. "Oh! Belle, I'm sick of this, sick of being tricked out in these fine things sitting here, when all the time my

one desire is to be back in town doing something to get our affairs out of the lovely tangle we have got them into."

"If ye can't be aisy, be as aisy as ye can!" retorted Belle, whose more lymphatic nature did not revolt so strongly against this period of enforced inactivity as did that of her more active sister. She was willing to bask in the sunshine; to enjoy the version of daily bread as supplied by the excellent hostelry patronised by their hostess; to luxuriate to the full on the good things of life no matter through what channel they drifted to her. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' was one of Belle's mottoes. So perforce Eileen dragged on, affecting a pleasure she did not feel; until Mrs. Hornecke, feeling that glow of anticipation attendant upon the fulfilment of a charitable action, journeyed north to visit friends, leaving her guests free to return to town.

A month later found their arrangements still without definite shape.

In their quest of a dwelling that should combine the varied requirement of elegance, comfort, and economy, they had journeyed far and wide. With the last day of July the carriage had vanished. So, many hours of the hot September days were passed

sweltering inside 'busses. Had they condescended to act like sensible folk and travel on top, they would have had a breath of air and a view. Unfortunately for their own comfort, one of the strictest tenets of the Misses Make-Believe's creed was that, though stress of circumstances might induce her to journey *in*side, no lady would ever be seen riding *out*side a 'bus.

They had viewed dwellings North, South, and West. Tempted thereto by florid advertisements that promised much and performed nothing, they had worn out time and strength and temper. The latter fortnight of September had been depressingly wet, and the house-hunters had mired their boots and wasted their clothes for nothing.

The return of the Horneckes in the beginning of October—Mrs. Hornecke from Scotland, John from Switzerland—found matters no farther advanced. Eileen seemed worn out and was silently despondent; Belle peevish and complaining.

"Those silly girls are no nearer being settled than they were a month ago. They'll never find what they seek if they look for it with their noses in the air and the notions of exiled princesses!" declared Mrs. Hornecke, who, always energetic, had during her absence from town stored up enough

strength to remove mountains. "And you say they must be prepared to leave Half Down Street before Christmas? Well, I'm going to take the matter into my own hands and find them a house myself."

Then followed several days whereon Mrs. Hornecke left home early and returned late. On the fourth, apparent success crowned her efforts; for she burst in upon the Flemings who, having just returned from a bootless errand, were fatigued and almost despairing.

"Well, girls! Found the house yet?"

"No. Another disappointment." Belle being melancholy beyond words, Eileen was constrained to reply. "That pretty little house in St. John's Wood that we thought would have suited us so nicely—you remember I told you it was like a bower with creepers and had a fountain and French windows?—Well, it seemed so cheap at sixty-five pounds that we had quite decided to take it, when we discovered that the tenant merely wished to get rid of the fag-end of a repairing lease; and we knew to avoid *that*."

"Very likely it was only the creepers that kept the house from falling to pieces. At the end of the three years we might have had hundreds to

pay for rebuilding." Belle had accumulated energy enough to remark.

"And in winter the creepers would have been leafless, and the French windows draughty,—and even the smallest London garden costs something to keep in order," sagely commented their visitor. "Well, girls, I do believe I've found the very place you want. What do you say to a flat not more than a mile from here—five rooms and kitchen, electric light, hot water, rent only fifty-five pounds including taxes?" she announced triumphantly.

"It *sounds* all right," Belle agreed with a reluctance born of much untoward experience. "But it's certain to be in a slum, or somebody must have committed suicide in it, or done something horrid to make it so cheap."

"It's really awfully good of you taking so much trouble, Aunt Hornecke." Eileen, though more gracious, was also dubious. "But we have so often been disappointed——"

"Why not get on your hats, and come to judge for yourselves?" was Mrs. Hornecke's sensible rejoinder. "It's not far, and if you come home to tea with me afterwards, we can discuss it comfortably."

"By way of proving her find easy of access, Mrs.

Hornecke eschewed the modest luxury of a cab; and, piloting her charges to the Marble Arch, hailed a Maida Vale 'bus.

"I must say I consider it amazingly lucky to find an inexpensive house so situated that a penny 'bus-fare takes one to the Park and to Oxford Street," she commented. Finding her companions not disposed to be enthusiastic about a house they had not yet seen, and noting the mute scorn wherewith, as they slowly jogged up the coster-beloved Edgeware Road, Belle received her suggestion that the locality would prove a cheap marketing-ground, Mrs. Hornecke relapsed into silence, resolving to let the flat speak for itself.

Clevernole Mansions, Podrington Road, W., was a long stretch of gaunt, many-storeyed buildings. By a mischance the ladies had gone a block farther than was necessary in the 'bus, and so entered from the embryonic top, instead of, as their guide had proposed, from the more mature bottom of the road.

The upper portion of Clevernole Mansions revealed variant degrees of non-completion, from the top houses whose windows still lacked sashes and whose yet unfixed grates turned disconsolate faces to the street-wall, revealing naked rust-encrusted

backs to the public gaze, through all the intermediate stages to the lower end where window draperies and spindling plants in an amazing variety of ornate pots declared tenants to be in possession.

Before one doorway a little boy was digging in the mud with a wooden spade. Outside another, where a hire-system van was disgorging its contents, the pavement was blocked by one of those ingenious articles of furniture devised apparently to form a gratuitously ugly couch by day and an extremely uncomfortable bed by night. Heedless of the nerves of the passers-by, a milkman uttered his soul-tormenting *whoop!* and a coster-woman hawking palms annoyed them by persistently obtruding her wares.

"It was all my stupidity," Mrs. Hornecke accused herself. "If I had led you aright, we would have come from the foot of the road. Then we would have got a better impression. Half-built houses are so depressing to look at. Of course I would never dream of advising you to rent a *new* house. Why people will persist in courting rheumatism by rushing into these half-baked houses I cannot fathom. Here is our destination at last," she added, with evident relief. "The flat I liked is on the fourth

floor. It is ever so much lighter at the top, and one is beautifully independent of neighbours."

There were no lifts in Clevernole Mansions, and the trio began the ascent in silence. The gloomy aspect of the road from which the tall buildings excluded the light had discouraged even Eileen, who was anxious to be favourably impressed. Half way up the second flight Belle, who thought nothing of running up and down their own stairs half-a-dozen times a day, sighed pensively. At the top of the third she paused to groan audibly. But Mrs. Hornecke, who had no patience with Belle's vapours, plodded steadily upwards without any expression of sympathy, and Eileen followed close at her heels.

There was much to be said for Mrs. Hornecke's choice of a dwelling. Being up in the sky, the little flat was bright and airy; and though none of the rooms was large, all were of quite a liveable size. But to Belle these qualifications availed nothing. Before setting foot in Clevernole Mansions, Miss Fleming had made up her mind to have none of them.

"What a poky room! It looks as though it had been made to accommodate pigmies!" she exclaimed, sailing into the dining-room. "How ridiculously narrow the mantelpiece is! None of our

timepieces could possibly stand there." And remembering the massive clock balanced by groups of Grecian figures all in solid bronze that adorned their dining-room in Half Down Street, the others tacitly agreed with her.

Poking a scornful nose into the neatly-fitted little bath-room, Belle made caustic comment.

"It's a mercy we are both thin, Eileen. If any plump person were rash enough to squeeze herself into that bath, she had better make up her mind to be buried in it. She'd never get out!"

"The bedrooms are not at all a bad size. There is a space in each where a bed could stand nicely. And this kitchen is a dear. It is so tricky and neat," pronounced Eileen. "But where are the cupboards and the larder?"

And in their lack Mrs. Hornecke was obliged to confess lay the weak point of all flat accommodation.

"Well,—perhaps we won't have very much to store in a larder. But where are we to keep our china if there is no china-closet?"

"On the dresser shelves and hooks."

"And the linen, if there is no linen-cupboard?"

"And our trunks, if there is no lumber-room?" But at this juncture even Mrs. Hornecke's ingenuity failed.

"Why! here is a nice cupboard," exclaimed Eileen, who had opened a door at the side of the dresser. "If we put shelves all round, there would be room for quite a lot of little things; and a trunk or two could stand on the floor."

"I'm afraid that is intended for the servant's bedroom," Mrs. Hornecke made reluctant admission.

At her remark, Eileen, who had been measuring the inside of the chamber by pocket-handkerchiefs, paused incredulously.

"Never! why, it only measures three lengths of my handkerchief wide, and six long. Good Heavens! What manner of a servant could possibly sleep here? She would require to be a dwarf!"

"And a skinny dwarf, too," interposed Belle. "And there's a gas-stove, and I never could endure the odour of a gas-stove. Eileen, you know you hate them too. You know you can't deny you always say that if there is a gas-stove in a house you smell it the moment the door is opened. Aunt Hornecke, there is not the slightest use in our looking at houses of this class. I'd rather be dead than living in one."

While the three—Belle haughtily indignant, Eileen dispirited at the prospect of once more be-

ginning the weary quest, and their conductress chagrined at the ignominy heaped upon her castle in the air—descended the long stairs leading to the street, Mrs. Hornecke vowed—as every impulsively generous woman has frequent occasion to vow—that never again would she attempt to do anyone a good turn.

On their way down it seemed to the mortified lady as though everything combined to show the Mansions in the worst possible light. The strident voice of a coal-heaver, who shouted his wares from the hall beneath, came echoing up the narrow staircase with deafening clamour. Half way down the third flight a streamlet of spilt milk trickled slowly from step to step. An open door afforded a glimpse of an untidy interior. The immature maid, in short skirt and long apron, who was polishing the door-brasses with the ragged foot of a stocking, stopped her work to gape as the ladies trooped silently past.

It was raining a little when they reached the road. There was no question of busses now; but they had to walk almost to Maida Vale before finding a cab-rank.

The drive to Winton Square was a silent one. Belle, whose sense of injury had culminated in the discovery that her trailing skirt had been rent by a

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nail left in the floor of one of the rooms, stained by the spilt milk, and further soiled by the mud, added to the general depression by holding the ruined hem of her garment prominently in view, and gazing at it with the dismay of one whose world is lost.

It was a relief on entering the drawing-room to find a bright fire, tea ready, and John waiting their arrival.

"Well—what luck?" he asked cheerily, coming forward to greet them. "Has the flat proved the miniature paradise the mater declares it to be?"

"It is very nice. Very nice indeed." As she replied, Eileen cast an admonitory glance at her sister, who, wearing a not altogether simulated aspect of utter exhaustion, had sunk into an easy chair. Mrs. Hornecke, her bonnet-strings unloosed, was already busy at the tea-tray, and took no part in the conversation.

"Then have you decided to take it?" Hornecke had a man's blunt way of insisting upon a direct answer.

"It would be cosy. Delightfully cosy and snug. But I'm afraid our furniture would scarcely fit——"

An ironical laugh came from the depths of Belle's arm-chair.

"Scarcely fit! That is a beautifully diplomatic

way of putting it. Scarcely fit, when it is safe to prophesy that there isn't a single article in our present home that wouldn't look Brobdinagian in that ridiculous doll's-house. Imagine trying to put our twenty-four dining-room chairs and the table, that can comfortably seat thirty, in that microscopic room!"

"What need have you two women with twenty-four dining-room chairs and a table that seats thirty? A table that seated half-a-dozen would surely be a more convenient size?"

Without deigning to reply, Belle went on—"And those dreadful neighbours! If it is intolerable now, what will it be like in a year's time, when half the people have had more children and the other half have taken in lodgers?" Belle's tone was that of hot resentment. "I couldn't exist a day in a rabbit-warren like that. I'd rather bury myself alive in the country first."

Mrs. Hornecke, chin in air, her lips compressed, kept silence; her literal step-son took the suggestion conveyed in Belle's words seriously.

"In the country? Come now, that is rather a good idea, and might be easily carried out. Indeed, I heard to-day of a place that might suit. I waited to see if you had decided to take the flat, before

speaking of it. There would be no question of refurnishing in this case, for the house is already furnished."

"Why, John, do you mean your own house—the cottage that old Miss Dumbleton left you in that village near Pennyland? I thought it was let to somebody?"

"So it was, mater. But I heard to-day that my tenant is leaving at the end of October. So if you would care to have it"—he addressed Belle, as the elder sister, but his eyes were quick to watch Eileen's expression—"I would be glad to have it occupied."

A silence fell upon the group. Which of us cares to be taken at our word? Certainly not Miss Fleming. Though she did not confess it, Belle's opinion respecting the suitability or unsuitability of each individual dwelling was governed entirely by what she understood to be Major Bryson's point of view.

Since the day when the ungallant soldier so discreetly ran away, she had, with true feminine ingenuity, argued herself into the belief that half-a-dozen reasons, each more meritorious than the actual one, lay at the root of the sudden cessation of his attentions.

The reception of a picture post-card from Marien-

bad, where Major Bryson was undergoing his annual cure, had raised her hopes; until the subsequent disovery that he had been in town for some time, and had left for a northern shooting without finding time to call, had lowered them to zero. Now in bitterness of spirit she mentally decided that if a desirable house within the radius of the Major's charmed circle was beyond their means, it scarcely mattered how far outside it they established themselves. The farther away the better.

"Where is the house?" she asked ungraciously.

"At Strete Tything, a village in Devonshire. No, not anywhere near the sea," Hornecke answered in reply to a query from Eileen. "Quite inland. Not near anywhere you ever heard of."

Belle laughed, weary recklessness in her tone.

"Once we are out of London, it really does not matter how distant we are. Everybody will think us dead, and I suppose the farther away one goes the less it costs to live. Pennyland *sounds* cheap enough at any rate. Eileen, we two bad children, who have squandered all our sovereigns, will tie up our belongings in red pocket-handkerchiefs and go to retrench at Pennyland!"

## CHAPTER X

### Tears and Sugar-Plums

A GLOOMY day of late November saw the Flemings leave London in a South-west bound Express on their way to Pennyland.

The intervening days had passed swiftly. There had been little time for thought, none at all for repining. As what Eileen termed a "do-no-better," the sisters had taken their guardian's little furnished house at Strete Tything for a period that he, wisely, agreed to leave quite indefinite.

"I think it absurd nonsense to send them there, John," his step-mother had declared privately. "Belle and Eileen are town girls out and out. They'll never be happy away from shop-windows. They'll simply mope to death in the country. You'll see them back, bag and baggage, within three months."

The Devonshire cottage Hornecke had inherited from an old cousin of his mother, who had belonged to that county. Not caring to sell, he had retained

it just as old Miss Dumbleton had left it. For the last eighteen months it had been let to a retired naval man. The rent of the cottage, which was situated in a village in the heart of Devonshire, formed an insignificant fraction of his income, and Hornecke would gladly have let the Flemings use it rent free. Belle might have accepted his offer, but against it Eileen fought valiantly.

"We are not paupers, John. And, even if we were, we are deep enough in your debt already, without getting farther into it. If you will allow us to pay you exactly what your last tenant paid, we'll take the house. Not unless."

Forced, greatly against his inclination, to pledge himself to accept a yearly rental of £30, Hornecke inwardly resolved to devote as much of the money as he could without arousing Eileen's suspicions in making the dwelling comfortable for its new inmates.

As for the Flemings, their only desire—the craving that comes to us all when we realise that we have made a mess of our lives, have recklessly squandered our opportunities—was to get away from all their old associations and begin afresh.

But though the Flemings fully realised that they were preparing to enter a new life,—a life without

footmen, carriages, or entertainments,—when it came to deciding what was to be taken with them and what left behind to be sold, perpetual difficulties and dissensions arose.

"We must take all our clothes. Yes, evening cloaks and everything." As she spoke, Belle was engaged in the not uncongenial labour of clearing out their largest dress cupboard. "It is absurd your looking dubious, Eileen. There must be some sort of society even near Pennyland," she added, throwing yet another tired-looking evening gown on the heap on the bed. "Pennyland! what a hatefully penurious sound the name has, hasn't it? If it had even been Shillingland it wouldn't have been so bad."

"Or Poundland, or Sovereignville," amended Eileen, who was rummaging in a drawer amongst a chaos of discarded gloves, soiled ribbons, and flabby chiffons. "Thank your stars it isn't Farthing-Town. That would have been worst of all."

"Before we leave London we must get our address printed on some good note-paper. Nothing proclaims the state of people's finances as does cheap stationery. We simply cannot afford to use it. By the bye, what is the name of the house—if it has a name, that is."

"I think John Hornecke called it Beulah Bank."

"Oh, good Heavens! *That* will never do. Beulah Bank, of all things! It sounds as though it had been built by a nonconformist butterman out of his savings."

"If we stay on at Strete Tything—"

"Which Heaven forfend," interposed Belle devoutly.

"Perhaps in time, if we prove very good tenants, John will allow us to rechristen the house. And then we will call it Balmoral or Buckingham Palace, or something equally suggestive of our high lineage."

One specially vexing question had been the disposal of their old cook Sarah Mingalls; but that problem, happily for her mistresses, Mingalls herself solved.

She had been many years in the family. Already elderly when her servitude began, she had yearly become slower footed, more asthmatic, less certain of temper. Though the succession of callow footmen had perforce endured her company, it was unlikely that any female servants would. The knowledge that the presence of a Mingalls would heavily handicap their new career, that as they could afford but one maid she ought to be young and active,

was overbalanced by the recollection of Mingalls' faithful service, and by the conviction that, old and in failing health, she would experience great difficulty in getting another situation within her working capacity. Suffering acutely that confliction of spirit experienced only by the reluctantly charitable, her mistresses told Mingalls that they had decided to take her with them to the country.

To their mingled annoyance and relief the object of their magnanimity declined to accept it. Mingalls, whose urban existence had been passed grubbing in an underground kitchen, whose view of London life, excepting during her occasional outings, had been gleaned through the area railings, flatly refused to accompany them to Devonshire. Nay, further, she appeared almost inclined to imagine herself insulted by being asked to go.

"But you were born in the country, Mingalls," Belle made astounded protest. "We thought you would have been delighted to go back. Besides, the pure air would cure your asthma."

But Mingalls, who knew her own mind, proved adamant.

"I was born there and I know what the country is, ma'am," she remarked darkly. "London's good enough for me. I'd rather have a crust in town

than a bellyful in the country, as the sayin' is. Besides which, I've allers been accustomed to service where a man was kep'."

That difficulty thus easily disposed of, the more troublesome one of the selection of possessions began. At first it seemed as though there was scarcely an article in the Half Down Street house that one or other of the sisters did not wish to retain. Upon Hornecke's emphatic reminder of the very limited capacity of his cottage, their choice finally resolved itself upon certain of the lighter items of drawing-room and bedroom furniture, all the silver, besides the family stock of crystal and china; which latter, despite the thinning-out process incident upon the last seven years' service, still proved a considerable item.

"I wonder where the Flemings will find room for all the things they are keeping. They are taking a lot of trash and flummery, cushions, and ornaments, and dishes. And where they'll put the empty boxes—if they ever do get their contents into the cottage—*I* don't know."

"There's plenty of room to store lumber in the empty stable and coach-house. They won't be setting up a carriage."

"Well, I wouldn't put it past them," retorted

Mrs. Hornecke, nodding her head oracularly. "John, did you know Eileen has insisted on taking both those pairs of handsome mauve plush curtains? The winter ones that used to be in the dining-room, I mean. After what you said, too."

"The plush curtains? I understood she had decided to sell them. What made her change her mind?"

"Well, I think it was because Amelia Parsons—you know the Parsons live just across the street from the Flemings—well, Amelia told me that she had always admired those curtains, and that if they were to be sold they would probably buy them. I mentioned it to Eileen, thinking they might be pleased to know things were likely to sell well. I suppose that put her back up, for she said at once that they weren't for sale. That they were going to take these curtains to Strete Tything."

"And I was beginning to fancy Eileen was learning wisdom," mused her step-son regretfully. But he kept his fancies to himself.

The Horneckes had seen them off from Waterloo Station, Mrs. Hornecke kind-hearted and outspoken as ever, her step-son's outwardly brusque manner successfully concealing much inward sympathy.

As Eileen and Belle drove up, he came forward to greet them.

"You have plenty of time," he said reassuringly. "Your seats are reserved, and I've got the tickets. This porter will take round anything you wish to the carriage. You'll find the mater there. I'll settle with the cabman, and see the heavy luggage into the van."

The minutes that were passed seated in the carriage listening to Mrs. Hornecke's well-intentioned and doubtless valuable hints as to the conduct of their future establishment, her pressing invitations to pass Christmas at Winton Square, and her reminders to alight at Pennyland for Strete Tything, seemed to overstrung Eileen endless. All the pent-up emotion of the past few months clamoured for utterance.

"Would the train never start?" she wondered, consumed by a nervous fear of breaking down, and feeling as though it would be a relief to scream.

As for Belle, she appeared to extract a species of melancholy joy from the occasion. She had dressed for it in the deepest black she possessed, and her manner was that of a wrongfully banished queen going into exile.

John Hornecke, standing by the carriage-door

watch in hand, appeared to share Eileen's secret impatience. He had loaded the travellers with magazines and books. An attractive-looking package, of whose existence he tried to appear oblivious, lurked amid their other belongings. He had resolutely refused to allow them to refund the price he had paid for the tickets; but, chary always of speech, he lacked now the power to express the good wishes wherewith travellers are wont to be sped.

"John," Eileen whispered tremulously, leaning out of the window at the last moment, "I have not had words to thank you, but . . ."

"*That's* all right," he interrupted hastily, as the whistle sounded, the green flag waved, and the train got into motion. "You'll find a hamper in the van. Cottage larder empty, you see."

It was well that they had the carriage to themselves, for, once out of the station, Eileen, struggling no longer to maintain her composure, wept unrestrainedly.

For a space Belle kept her sister company. Then, catching sight of the unfamiliar parcel, she temporarily abandoned her grief in favour of the investigation of its contents. It proved to be from Fuller's, and scarcely even an exiled queen would have proved invulnerable to the saccharine joys con-

tained in its beribboned interior. Even Eileen, her soul soothed by her hearty indulgence in tears, found her wet eyes glancing interestedly over the varied confections in quest of her special favorites.

There was no change of trains—a fortunate matter for travellers encumbered with so much luggage —but after Salisbury the speed ceased to be express, and they jogged along through the early November gloom stopping ponderously, with much grinding and complaining of machinery and jarring of nerves, at every wayside station; the hours seemed interminable, and the impression that Pennyland lay at the Back of Beyond began to possess them.

Three o'clock had passed, and the scant winter daylight was already beginning to fade, when with slackening speed the train drew up beside an almost deserted platform, and a voice in an accent that was soon to become more familiar to their metropolitan ears shouted, "Pennyland."

"A carriage was ordered to be in waiting to convey us to Strete Tything. Has it arrived?" Miss Fleming, who had determined from the first to keep the natives at a distance, inquired in her most imposing tone of the solitary porter.

"The Zettin' Zun fly be 'ere, Miss," returned

the youth, who wore an annoying air of imperturbable stolidity.

The Setting Sun fly proved to be a closed conveyance of sepulchral aspect, which as Eileen said resembled nothing but a miniature family vault set on tyreless wheels.

"And smells like one, too. Faugh!" added Belle. "One would require to be square to fit this vault," she added when they had got packed inside, and the more portable of their belongings were in process of being bumped on the flat roof overhead. "But I suppose the people here are square. There can't possibly be anything to do but get fat."

To the annoyance of its occupants, the conveyance seemed to have been specially designed to frustrate any of their efforts to see whether they were being driven. The sides were void of opening. A tiny window in the door afforded a circumscribed retrospect of the path they had traversed. A slightly larger casement to the front appeared to invite an exhaustive scrutiny of the skirts of the driver's coat.

"*Quite* respectable," commented Belle, affecting to examine the garment critically. "A little moth-eaten and mouldy, perhaps, but admirably in keeping with the character of the equipage. And in

honour of our advent, the gentleman has made a praiseworthy if somewhat perfunctory attempt to remove the tarnish from his silver-plated buttons. It is the first sign of any celebration of our arrival; and, as it will most probably be the last, we must show a proper appreciation of the attention by giving him an extra sixpence."

The way to Strete Tything, after passing the straggling outskirts of the little town, lay through a network of lanes sunk between high banks, delightfully shady and cool in summer doubtless, but, viewed by unfamiliar eyes in a November dusk, gloomy and uninviting in the extreme.

"Belle," Eileen whispered apprehensively: "I hate to be superstitious, but—did you notice the name of the inn this fly came from? The *Setting Sun*. Doesn't that seem a bad omen for us?"

"Omen! I've given up thinking of luck now. The very day John Hornecke came and upset things"—against her better judgment Belle Fleming half blamed their guardian for the troubles their own extravagance had brought—"I put on a stocking inside out and didn't turn it for fear of changing the luck. I saw a sweep passing, and bowed three times to him. And you know how, before night, everything had gone to pieces."

"Poor Belle," Eileen murmured, patting her sister's hand affectionately, and wondering if she would ever quite forget the renegade Major. "Poor Belle!" Then, with the common dread of showing feeling, she added quickly: "What a frightful time this fly seems to take to travel two miles."

"Fly!" retorted Belle briskly, her melancholy flown with the opportunity of denouncing something. "To judge by the way it crawls, somebody must have pulled off its wings. I don't believe this part of the world is really inhabited. I have been counting the houses all along this ridiculous road, and so far there have only been *three*. Two of these were mere huts, and one was an odd place within a high battlemented wall."

"'Cottage, castle, house, hut'! Do you remember when we were children, how we used to try to find out what social position we would have?"

"Well, all I can say is," retorted Miss Fleming as the vehicle, with a bone-shaking jerk, turned into the village street, "that if this is Strete Tything, we may once and for ever abandon any idea of Society, for a more God-forsaken spot I never saw!"

## CHAPTER XI

### A Warm Welcome

THE Setting Sun fly crawled down the street which widened out in the centre of the village to permit the sudden appearance of a stream sentinelled on either side by half-a-dozen trees and spanned midway by a tiny bridge: a stream which, a hundred yards farther on, disappeared below the ground, as though it had merely popped up to have a look at the inhabitants and, not finding them particularly to its liking, had promptly ducked down again. On the fly crawled, past the grocer's shop that was also a baker's, and—its sole rival emporium—the baker's shop that was also a grocer's; and on past the police-station, a creeper-covered cottage whose outward emblem of the majesty of the law was the blue enamelled plate that proclaimed it the local habitation of the Devon Constabulary.

Just beyond the church it pulled up with a jerk at the gate of a house standing end on to the road.

"Well, I suppose we are home." The dullness

of Eileen's tone did not speak highly for her anticipations.

"*Home!*" echoed Belle, with nothing dull in her tone.

A stout matron, who in the first breath introduced herself as Mrs. Campkins, and whose shortness of wind did not check her volubility, hastening down the garden-path made ponderous haste to open the door of the fly.

"Square, I warned you. Positively square," Belle glanced back to murmur over her shoulder as she alighted.

"You'll find the 'ouse cleaned up beautiful, and fires in every room, 'm. Me and my Cecilia here has been busy at it ever since the last tenants left 'em."

In the drawing-room to the left of the porch a hot fire was blazing. The day was mild, almost close. Finding the atmosphere insupportable, Eileen was beating a hasty retreat to the dining-room when she encountered her sister escaping from it.

"Talk about warm welcomes! There's a roaring furnace in there. Mrs. Campkins! Mrs. Campkins! Do you know there's a huge fire in the dining-room—at least I suppose it's the dining-room; I'm afraid the chimney may go on fire."

"No fear of that, 'm. Postman he came last week and swep' all the chimbleys, 'm."

"But I don't think you know how mild it is outside to-day. Almost warm, really. Such big fires are scarcely necessary," interposed Eileen, tormented by visions of a rapidly increasing coal-bill.

Mrs. Campkins nodded her well-oiled head.

"Yes, 'm. But I had my orders. The gentleman he says—'the ladies will be sure to be cold at the end of such a long journey,' ses he. 'Be sure, wot ever you do,' he says, 'to 'ave good fires on in every room'."

The sisters exchanged glances.

"'The gentleman'? Do you mean Mr. Hornecke?" Belle asked.

"Yes, Miss. Mr. 'Ornecke. Him wot owns this 'ouse. He came 'ere one day last week—Tuesday it was, 'm. He didn't stay long. Jest passin' through, he said he was. But he asked me to see that the place was made ready for you, and ordered in the coal, and set old Deeble a-workin' in the garden, he did."

"John again!" said Belle pettishly, as they sat in the dining-room with the casement-window opened wide, and took tea and hot buttered toast. "One of my reasons in coming here was to get rid of John

Hornecke. I hope he does not mean to keep us under surveillance, because I won't put up with it if he does. We have little enough money now; surely he can leave us to spend it as we like?"

"Let us begin on an honest basis this time," pleaded Eileen in a low voice. "Don't let us pretend to be anything we are not. I don't know how you feel about it, Belle, but I shall never rest till our debt to John Hornecke is paid off."

"Pooh! John Hornecke is a rich man. The money he advanced was nothing to him; he'll never miss it."

"But don't you understand I hate to feel under an obligation to him when I know how he disapproves of us and all we do? We have three-hundred-and-fifty a year—Don't you think that here we might manage to live on two hundred, and devote the remainder to paying off our debt to John?"

"Two hundred a year—to pay rent and clothes, and travelling and everything! It's no use thinking of it," Belle had exclaimed. Then: "we can try, if you want to so badly," she added, noticing her sister's downcast expression. "But I may as well tell you beforehand that I don't think we shall succeed."

The tread of a heavy foot shod in creaking boots sounded in the hall.

"I do wish that woman would go away. We can't feel the house our own while she's creaking about. And she is so big and hot she sends up the temperature appallingly. We won't cool down till she has gone. Come in!" she added, raising her voice in answer to a hesitating tap.

The door opened to admit Mrs. Campkins, flanked by a damsel whose flat round face they had already seen peeping from the back premises.

"I wanted to say, 'm, if so as you haven't a servant of your own, and were wanting one, how would my maidy here do? Cecilia her name is. I've been in superior service myself, 'm, and I've larned her how to work; and she knows as 'ow things should be done."

"No, we didn't bring any of our own domestics." Miss Fleming's tone suggested that they had kept at least a dozen. "London servants don't care to leave town. Besides, we are not certain how long we shall stay here. Your daughter might suit us. What do you think, Eileen?"

Eileen being of opinion that as Miss Campkins was the only applicant they would do well to give her a trial, terms were speedily arranged. Cecilia

was to get wages at the rate of ten pounds a year, and the customary outings, and to enter service at once.

"Well, that's cheap enough," Belle agreed, when they were again alone. "One menial at ten pounds a year! If we do everything on the same lavish scale, we won't be able to spend £200 a year."

Mrs. Campkins, after bestowing on her daughter instructions sufficient to turn any less stolid brain, had creaked ponderously off, pausing at the side gate to offer yet another suggestion. Then the sisters, feeling the house curiously empty, set out—candlesticks in hand—on a voyage of discovery.

In addition to the rooms they had already seen, the ground floor comprised a chamber behind the dining-room which had evidently been used as a cloak and box-room. To the back of the drawing-room was a cosy kitchen. The scullery beyond opened into a neat yard whose range of outbuildings which they inspected in the early winter dusk, showed a miniature stable and coach-house, and a coal-cellar which they were surprised to discover was full of coal. John Hornecke's thoughtfulness had not stopped at ordering the house to be well fired. He had provided the fuel to do it with.

Giving instructions that when the luggage-cart

arrived from the station its contents were to be temporarily placed in the empty coach-house, they returned to the house to inspect the upper rooms. The first floor—there was no second—had five rooms. Of these three were small, as Eileen said, and two smaller. One of the tiny rooms was fitted up as a dressing-room; the other, to the front over the porch, had evidently been used as a servant's room.

The furniture was old-fashioned and showed signs of wear; but it also showed signs of refined taste. Belonging happily to the spindle-leg period, it was aged without being aggressive.

"Everything may be worn and faded, but it is quite liveable with, and some of the things are quite delicious," pronounced Eileen in a tone of relief. "Fancy if we had found these ridiculous little rooms bunged up with heavy mahogany wardrobes!"

But Belle, the excitement of novelty already fading, had flopped down on the bed in the back bedroom.

"Hateful stuffy little holes! I'm certain you could put this entire house into our drawing-room in Half Down Street. I know *I* shan't be able to live here."

"Well, if the rooms aren't large, they won't be difficult to keep clean; and but for Mrs. Campkins' zeal they wouldn't be so hot. Come, what we both need is a good supper. Let us go down to the kitchen and unpack the hamper, and then we'll go to bed early. And we'll leave off deciding whether we like the place or not till morning."

But Cecilia of the blank expression, when requested to bring the hamper, surprised her mistresses by demanding to know *which* hamper, for there were two.

And two sure enough there were. Both came from the Stores. Both alike in outward appearance, and both were addressed to the Misses Fleming.

"Aunt Hornecke told me yesterday she was sending a hamper, that we needn't bother to provide anything," said Belle.

"And just as the train left, John said something about a hamper in the van; but I thought they both meant the same one."

Hornecke's hamper when unpacked proved to contain a roast chicken, a dressed tongue, a veal-and-ham pie. Mrs. Hornecke's hamper when unpacked proved to contain a roast chicken, a dressed tongue, a veal-and-ham pie.

"Well," said Belle almost jovially, as they sat down to attack the pie, "Providence evidently does not mean us to starve in exile. I wonder how long it is since we had such a full larder."

And Eileen, when at last she fell to sleep in her strange bed, dreamt of John Hornecke, seeing him not as the disapproving guardian of later years but as the grown-up friend who had been the hero of her childhood's days.

## CHAPTER XII

### Melancholy and Mist

"I SHAN'T get up this morning. I lay awake for hours last night. And I can only have dozed off when the crow of some wretched cock woke me up again. I shall rest in bed to-day. There's nothing earthly to get up for."

"But we don't know yet what it looks like outside," urged Eileen. "It was too dark last night to see anything. Won't curiosity induce you to get up?"

"It's pouring of rain. Besides, I stared out of the window for quite ten minutes at nothing. Though this house is presumably in the village, not a soul went by. How we are to pass the days I don't know. If we live here long we shall forget how human beings look."

"We'll be 'so unacquainted with man, that our tameness will be shocking to see,'" misquoted Eileen, laughing.

"Don't try to be funny," Miss Fleming was in no mood for jesting. "If that idiot down-stairs has got the kettle boiling, you might send me up some breakfast. I think I could take some dry toast and a slice of tongue. And be sure to make my tea yourself. You know how I like it. I might have a wing of fowl too. If we don't use them they'll spoil."

"And oh! Eileen," she called as her sister began descending the stairs, "if there is anything readable in the bookcase, bring it up with the tray. Don't send up that gaping girl. She makes me want to scream."

Assured that there was little need for anxiety regarding an invalid who was able to issue such minute instructions respecting her creature comforts, Eileen proceeded down-stairs, where the new maid greeted her with a bob curtsey.

Cecilia had evidently done her best. A tiny fire burned in the dining-room grate; and the room had been vigorously swept, as Eileen had heard in her room above. That it had also been sketchily dusted she had ocular proof. The laying of the table revealed certain oddities. A breakfast-cup set in a tea-saucer stood by each cover. Large forks usurped the place of small, and there were no table-

napkins; but such trifling mistakes were easily remedied.

Having prepared a breakfast-tray and carried it up to her sister,—who, though she criticised the various items exhaustively, appeared ready to do full justice to its contents,—Eileen returned to the dining-room and, removing a table that blocked the window, opened it and leant out.

The rain Belle had grumbled at proved to be merely a soft mist, a humid moisture that softened outlines and veiled distances, without making the ground appreciably wet. Quickly deciding that it would not hinder her explorations, Eileen drew in deep breaths of the sweet western air. An unwonted sense of relief was upon her. She felt as though the wrench that had separated her from her old life had also released her shoulders from a burden under which, for many days, she had laboured.

Change of residence often brings something of the exhilaration of adventure. Here everything was so fresh, so interesting, that Eileen found herself hurrying over her meal the sooner to be free to explore her little kingdom.

Throwing a light shawl over her head, she opened the front-door and peeped out. A high

fence, overtopped by shrubs, screened them from the road, and she was able to take her observations unnoticed. As though desirous of showing its superiority to its neighbours, Beulah Bank turned a cold shoulder to the main road—if you could dignify by the title of main road a lane that came from, and apparently led to, nowhere.

The cob walls were cream washed. A heavy thatch covered the sloping roof and protruded great shaggy eyebrows over the upper windows. In the flower-bed that enclosed the diminutive lawn a few hardy chrysanthemums yet lingered. Leaves and buds still clung to the rose-bushes; and in a sheltered angle by the porch a gloire-de-Dijon rose blossomed as sweetly as though it were summer.

A giant creeper, that in its naked state Eileen did not recognise as wistaria, embraced the porch and threw gaunt sinewy arms along the front of the house. The grass had been recently cut, and the flower borders neatly put to bed for the winter; but Eileen was not yet gardener enough to know that.

While she was picking a few stray chrysanthemum blossoms and Michaelmas daisies from the border under the dining-room window, she caught sight of a long narrow window set in the wall close

to the ground and almost hidden behind the shrubs. Undoubtedly it was set there to give light to some underground apartment, and the sight of the dusty panes through which she got a vague impression of a chamber within promised a mystery.

An underground room implied a way down. Going into the hall, Eileen opened various doors, discovering the china-closet and a door leading into the back garden. Then, just as she was giving up the search, she opened a door under the stairs and saw a set of narrow steps leading down. A faint vegetable odour floated up. It was dark and to her unaccustomed eyes looked eerie.

A noise behind her as she peered made her turn abruptly round, to find the blank-faced maid gaping vacantly over her shoulder.

"Cecilia, I thought there was no basement to this house."

"No more there bain't, Miss." Adding as a cautious rider: "As ever I heard on."

"But do you see? There is a stair." Quite unconsciously, Eileen spoke in a whisper. "I must find out what it leads to. Get me a candle."

Light in hand, Eileen ventured down, taking slow steps, and feeling gratifyingly daring and heroic. Suddenly the stairs ceased, and she found herself

in an odd vault-like chamber wherein the only article of furniture was the slate-topped table that stood in the middle of the brick floor. High up in the wall was the narrow window, which shed a dim light over the mystery.

To Eileen's surprise, the place was not undiscovered country. Someone had been before her, for on the floor reposed neat heaps of sand-covered potatoes and of carrots. Sundry strings of onions and herbs hung from hooks in the low roof, and on the stone shelves were the yet untouched items from the twin hampers.

"Cecilia, I thought you told me this house had no basement?"

For once an expression—but whether it was pity for her ignorance or scorn of her stupidity Eileen could not tell—broke over the girl's stolid face.

"Yes'm. This 'ere be the cellar!"

Ascending the stairs and opening the door leading to the back garden, Eileen stepped out. At the further end, on a sheltered border near a wall, an old man with a face like a winter apple was sowing something in a shallow drill. The moist weather had bedewed his beard and soaked his coat, but he seemed as little affected by the moisture as a duck. Down two sides of the garden ran a cob wall, which

to Eileen's amazement showed a tiny roof of thatch. Across the foot ran a hedge beyond which stretched green fields.

"Thank Heaven the garden is not overlooked!" thought Eileen. "But I do wish the natives would keep out of it. "Good morning," she added, as the man saluted. "I did not know you were working here."

"T'war the Master, Miss," explained the old man, saluting again. "He came and he ses, ses 'e, 'do 'e put the garden in order against the ladies comin',' ses 'e. 'And I'll bear the expense,' ses 'e. So I done it up, and put the 'taters and carrots down cellar, Miss. Not that there warn't many, Miss. But happen you'm not a big family?" he broke off to ask.

"Only my sister and myself, and one maid."

"Well, uns enough to keep 'e a smart while. An' the parsnips, and Je-rus-alem artichokes 'll be better kep' in the ground till you need un. There be a tidy show of green-stuff," he added, pointing out the rows of cabbages, Brussels sprouts, and kale. "And now I be a-putten in peas in this warm border vor an early crop, and two row of longpod beans."

"But surely peas and beans are not sown till spring?" hazarded Eileen, afraid of venturing out

of her depth, but anxious to prevent the waste of good seed.

"Have 'e lived in Devonshire avore, Miss?" he asked quizzically. "I've heard there are parts w'ere they don't get no garden-peas till July. But 'ere—Lor' bless 'e, with any luck 'tall these yere'll be in the pot first week o' June, zure 'nuff. I used to grow un there for owd Miss Dumbleton, an' I knaw. I've pruned the gooseberries and the raspberries, but the bushes be wore out like."

"Oh! are there any strawberries—and asparagus?" Eileen's eager tone revealed that for the first time the wonderful possibilities of a garden had occurred to her.

The old man shrugged shoulders under his mist-bedewed coat. "There bain't no sparragrass, and the strawberries be grown to mass. The Captain, him wot 'ad the house, bein' a tenant an' the place not belongin' to un, 'e didn't trouble to put in no new plants. Most like 'e thought as 'ow they'd do 'is turn. I be a-goin' to dig un up after I finishes sowin' these 'ere."

Inspecting the strawberry-bed indicated by the horny finger, Eileen found the once neat rows of plants almost smothered by runners and weeds. Her face fell, for in her estimation a garden with-

out strawberries would hardly rank as a garden at all.

"If new strong plants were planted now, could we not have strawberries next summer?" she asked.

Deeble shook his head sagely.

"The new plants oughter 'ave been put in by August or September, Miss. An' it be nigh December now. 'Twould be temptin' of Providence to zet un before Spring, now."

Having completed covering in the last drill of peas with soil, Deeble had ambled along the path to where Eileen stood gazing disconsolately at the doomed strawberry-bed. Setting the broad blade of his spade on the outer edge of the overgrown patch, he drove it deep into the moist earth.

"Stop!" said Eileen. "These old plants look very healthy, though they are half choked. If you left them, would they not bear some fruit?"

"Oh! They'd *bear*, zure 'nuff," he admitted grudgingly, adding with all a gardener's contempt for poor specimens—"But the berries wouldn't be much bigger 'n wild uns."

In Eileen's opinion even a wild strawberry was something to be thankful for. So in defiance of Deeble's evident pity for her ignorance, she commanded him to leave the bed untouched.

The stroll in the sweet moist air, the subtly intoxicating scent of the fresh-tilled soil, had opened a new and wide range of interest to the town-bred girl.

When Belle, heavy-eyed and listless, descended to luncheon, she found Eileen, her damp shoes forgotten, her shawl thrown carelessly over the back of her chair, in her haste to dispel the ignorance of a life-time, devouring a gardening manual.

## CHAPTER XIII

### An Empty Web

THE first few days spent at Strete Tything passed swiftly. There was much to be done in the way of unpacking. The work of settling down was not a matter to be lightly accomplished. Miss Fleming's fastidious taste objected to the existing arrangement of the furniture, and several new dispositions were tried before one was finally approved and adopted.

"It is no use making any sweeping reforms such as papering and painting, for I know we won't stay here long," declared Belle. "But we must get some individuality into the house before anyone sees us in it. The natives are certain to rush to call. They must be so deadly sick of seeing only each other, that they will be eager to welcome fresh faces. Cecilia, remember we are not 'at home' to anybody —to *anybody,* remember—till I tell you."

So for the first four days the sisters devoted their skilled taste and best energies to their task of super-

ficially converting the cottage into an abode befitting their refined requirements. At the close of that period the changed aspect of the sitting-rooms repaid their toil.

In the drawing-room delicate cream-lace curtains draped the windows. A handsome Persian rug, spoil from the Half Down Street house, concealed the worst part of the faded carpet. Smart cushions lent an air of luxury to the threadbare sofa. A judicious scattering of photographs—a large one of Lady Turntowers in her coronation robe occupying the place of honour—several choice ornaments, and the installation of a couple of favourite lounging chairs, further transformed the room into a place that even the ultra-critical Belle was constrained to pronounce almost habitable.

A cloth, rich though a trifle voluminous for the table, fresh curtains, the addition of books to the scantily-filled book-case, and of certain pieces of the family silver to the sideboard, did much to render the dining-room cheerful. The ruthless banishment of a bulky fern-stand that blocked the larger window did more.

"I can understand people in town, where nobody wishes to look out, and everybody wants to peep in, blocking up their windows with this sort of

thing." Belle was helping Cecilia to convey Miss Dumbleton's once-cherished fern-case to a corner of the disused stable as she spoke. "I can even understand townsfolk lavishing their affections on ridiculous artificial-looking palms and aspidistras; but in the country, where at the worst they can get a branch of fresh-cut ivy for decoration, I cannot understand why people persist in wasting their time attending to sickly indoor plants."

On the Sunday it rained heavily. So, agreeing that it would be ludicrous to make their first appearance at church in a draggle-tailed condition, the Flemings remained quietly at home. As also, to judge from the few passers-by, viewed furtively from the upper windows, did most of the adult population of Strete Tything.

By Wednesday morning the rain had ceased, and Belle decided that they might reckon themselves in receiving order. "Though of course I haven't the slightest intention of knowing everybody who wishes to know us," she made resolute pronouncement. "Everyone may call once. We can't prevent that. But it will lie with us to select those with whom we mean to be intimate. It does no good to hold oneself too cheap in this world."

The preparations for the hosts of visitors that

Miss Fleming was convinced were eager to invade her dwelling were elaborate if circumscribed. While Eileen prepared some dainty tea-cakes, Belle drilled the maid in the art of admitting and announcing guests, a science regarding which she had discovered, providentially in time, Cecilia's mind to be a blank.

When Belle Fleming condescended to instruct, she did it thoroughly. Placing herself on the outside of the front-door, she proceeded to use the knocker in a way that would have flustered anyone save the phlegmatic Cecilia. On the appearance of that damsel, openmouthed but unabashed, Belle would formally inquire if the Misses Fleming were at home; waiting ceremoniously on her own doorstep until Cecilia had replied in the affirmative and invited her to enter. Thereafter pausing in the little hall until Cecilia had asked her name, she entered the drawing-room as the maid announced her to the empty walls.

Luncheon over, the sisters—attired in tea-gowns calculated to impress the inhabitants of much more fashionable places than Strete Tything—stationed themselves in the drawing-room, where a daintily set tea-tray stood in readiness on a side-table. Cecilia, decked in her best cap and apron, waited

spider-like with the kitchen-door ajar, ready to dart out and escort any visiting fly into the parlour.

But alas! the Strete Tything flies proved either too wary or too indifferent. Not one came.

"If anybody had been intending to call to-day, they would surely have come before this. It is getting quite dark. Why, it is five o'clock!" exclaimed Eileen, starting up as the hour chimed. "Let us have tea now, Belle. It's no use waiting any longer."

"I simply don't believe there is a soul in the place one could associate with." The trifling disappointment had induced Miss Fleming to resume her air of languid resignation, temporarily abandoned during the activities of the past few days.

"At the very worst, even in Strete Tything there must always be a doctor and a clergyman," opined Eileen cheerfully.

"I doubt it," was Belle's laconic reply. "Cecilia, is there a doctor in the village?" she asked, as Cecilia brought in the kettle.

"No, 'm."

"*No* doctor?"

"There was one, but he took to drink, and left, 'm."

"Well, there must be a clergyman?"

"No, 'm."

"No doctor! No clergyman!"

Like most people, Miss Fleming was more astounded at the confirmation of her predictions than was anyone else.

"I knew it, Eileen. I knew it. I have suspected it ever since we came, and I'm convinced now. This abominable village is a place where people never get born, or married, or die; where nothing ever happens; where the few people that were here at the beginning of the world still live on and on, because there's nobody at hand to bury them!"

"But tell us, Cecilia," argued the more moderate Eileen. "There is a church here. There must be an incumbent of some kind. Where is he?"

"The Reverend Dorkins is away for his 'ealth, ma'am."

"Then who takes his duty?"

"Mr. Crewkerne, over to Pennyland, takes the service, or his curate do, 'm."

"And if anybody in the village ever is ill, whom do they send for?"

"Most of them send for Dr. Gundry, what lives half way between here and Pennyland. But he won't come if there's a hunt on, 'm. Not exceptin' they're very bad, he won't."

"Well, Belle," remarked Eileen philosophically, as she measured the Chinese tea out of the silver caddy, "one thing is clear. That if you or I take ill of inanition we must be careful not to do it in hunting weather!"

Such articles as were required by the little household had been fetched by the stolid Cecilia, who surprised her mistresses by spending an unconscionably long time on her errands. Had they known how much information regarding themselves, their possessions, and their ways, Cecilia during these absences continued to disseminate through the village, they would have considered her remarkably expeditious!

On Thursday morning the sisters sallied forth to shop, Belle attired in a fashion that would not have discredited Bond Street. Eileen, who was more sensibly clad, wished to carry a basket, but that Belle resolutely refused to allow.

"The people must send home anything we order. If they don't choose to, we shall have a box sent down from the Stores."

But Miss Fleming's pride was fated to meet with sundry shocks before she again set foot in Beulah Bank. Their first visit was to the shop of the sole butcher, where, vastly to their surprise and not a

little to their chagrin, they found the door locked and the shutters up. They did not know that, having a monopoly of the meat business of Strete Tything, Mr. Hoblyn was an autocrat; who, when he had occasion to visit Pennyland, or to journey to the market town of Parkeval, or even to busy himself about his stock, quietly closed his shop, leaving the flesh-lovers of the district, who had not already provided themselves, to subtract nourishment from sucking their paws, like hungry bears in winter, until his return.

Having resolved to substitute an omelet for the steak they proposed purchasing, they entered the grocer-baker's, to be struck by the odd disparity in price between home-made, or home-grown, articles and imported ones. Asking for sixpennyworth of sponge-cakes, they were surprised to see the shopkeeper laboriously counting out fourteen. But they found ordinary groceries, such as candles and toilet soap, correspondingly dear.

The shop-keeper's eyes had opened wide at the idea of sending home their purchases. Her little girl was at school, she said,—would the afternoon do?

As the eggs and sponge-cakes were needed for lunch, Eileen settled the matter by picking up the

smaller items, while Belle perforce saddled herself with the sponge-cakes.

"How ridiculous! How utterly ridiculous! Just fancy if anyone saw us laden like—pack-horses! And did you see how blank that grocery woman looked? I thought Cecilia was the most expressionless person on earth, but she was positively worse. I don't believe she had the most remote idea we were new-comers. People must exist in these houses," she went on, glancing on either side, "yet there isn't a creature to be seen. I'm beginning to feel as though John Hornecke had lured us to an absolutely dead village."

"Wait a moment. Don't be too sure. There's a surprise in store for you," murmured Eileen, with a secret chuckle. "Just walk quietly on and don't, for goodness sake, look back till I tell you. Whenever I say '*Now!*' turn right round as quickly as you can, and you'll see what you'll see."

For another minute the pair walked sedately on. Then—"*Now!*" said Eileen, and Belle, swerving quickly round on her heel, discovered that the street up which they had a moment before passed without catching sight of even a solitary face at a window now revealed a considerable population. From every doorway and from several upper casements

peeped heads. On the step of the shop stood the woman who had served them (her expression no longer a blank) accompanied by two cronies, all three evidently engaged in eager criticism of the strangers.

The ludicrous little incident had the salutary effect of immediately raising Miss Fleming's flagging spirits.

"Still," she argued, "if the interest among even the village folks is so keen, it must be considerable among our own class too; and that makes the fact of their not having called all the more curious."

It was in the night that the solution of the mystery came to her, and Eileen was roused from sleep to find her sister—white-robed, candle in hand—bending over her.

"No. There's nothing wrong. Only I have discovered the reason why nobody has called yet. It is because we haven't yet been seen in church. What ninnies we were not to remember that our going to church would be accepted as the sign that we were ready to receive!"

"Oh, *bother!*" grumbled sleepy Eileen.

## CHAPTER XIV

### Public Worship

THEY attended church on Sunday, Eileen demure in brown, Belle resplendent in a gown made from velvet that her correct taste had enabled her to select as the only possible shade from amongst a job lot of coloured velvets offered at bargain rates, the previous winter, by the Holborn Silk Market. It had already seen a good deal of service, but, as the sisters agreed, everything they had would rank as new in Devonshire. And, as one of their pet economies lay in always having the skirts of their dresses made somewhat long, a new turning of the hem had freshened the skirt without unduly curtailing its length.

Furs age slowly. Miss Fleming's mink-marmot stole and muff—she always *thought* of them as sable—had already served her well. Shaken from their protective camphor and pepper, and carefully brushed they looked as good as new. And when she had remodelled her fur toque ino something

that would readily pass as the newest turban shape, and with the help of an imitation diamond brooch had fastened an osprey and a cluster of violets at the left side, her head-gear was one calculated to raise the spirit of envy throughout the entire female population of Strete Tything.

"How nice you look!" Eileen exclaimed involuntarily when, her toilet at length completed, Belle sailed down to the hall, where she waited impatiently. "But what have you been doing to your hair?"

Apprehension chased the gratified expression from Belle's face.

"Oh! do you notice it?" she asked anxiously. "I thought . . . Come in here a moment," she added, drawing her sister into the dining-room as the mildly inquiring countenance of Cecilia, crowned by an amazing ultramarine Sunday hat, appeared at the kitchen door.

"What do you notice about my hair? Is it the colour? It has worried me, but I thought it must be that wretched mirror in my room that made it look so pale."

Eileen examined the abundant and prettily-dressed hair critically.

"It seems ever so much paler than it was. It is quite pale golden now, almost flaxen."

"That is the result of having to do everything by that miserable light." Eager to fix the blame upon other than herself, Miss Fleming spoke indignantly. "I only meant to touch up the colour a little. My hair had seemed so dull lately, and I merely wished to brighten it. I suppose I must have applied the stuff too strong, or put too much on this time."

"It looks all right. No one would guess it wasn't quite—natural. Only—" Eileen hesitated. "The only thing is—the colour is so pale now, that when this fades one wonders what the next shade will be."

Belle's eyes were wide with horror.

"You don't mean it will turn green or purple like that man's in 'Ten Thousand a Year?' Do you?"

Eileen laughed.

"No, no. What a ridiculous idea! The only thing I thought of was that it might turn white. Be silver in place of gold."

"White!"

To Eileen's surprise, her sister's tone was that of relief.

"Why, I don't think I'd altogether object to white hair. Fancy being white-haired at thirty!

If one's face kept young, it would give the effect of being perpetually *poudrée*. One would look like a French marquise. Just think how distinguished that would be!"

And during service, while Miss Fleming's smart fur turban bent reverently over the prayer-book held in her delicately-gloved hands, her vagrant thoughts busied themselves devising colour-schemes, and styles of dress suited to a (comparatively) young lady with abundant snowy hair.

The visit to church raised her mercurial spirits. She returned home happy in the impression that her carefully-studied appearance had made the desired effect.

"I'm sure everybody was wondering who we were. Did you see that though the grown-ups tried to appear unconscious of our presence, the children frankly stared?" she remarked complacently when they were back at Beulah Bank.

"There are evidently some quite knowable people living near. Did you notice that three carriages were waiting at the close of the service? I wonder who that ugly man was who read the lessons. What a delightful voice he had! I could obey a man who spoke like that."

"Even if he were ugly?" laughed Eileen, as

kneeling she gently waved her hat before the fire, with the object of ridding the ostrich-feathers of any moisture they might have abstracted from the damp autumnal atmosphere before putting it away in its bandbox. She was well accustomed to Belle's flights of fancy.

"His is an attractive species of ugliness."

"Like that of Rochester in 'Jane Eyre'?"

"I could have loved a man like Rochester. Eileen, I really think that in time we may get to know quite a nice little circle here. I only hope" —her expression had changed, some sudden doubt crossing her sanguine mind had robbed her of her buoyancy—"that, because we live in a poky little house like this and keep only one raw country girl as servant, people won't think it is all we have been accustomed to. I wonder if anybody here knows who father was?"

"If they don't already know, I'm sure you will seize the first opportunity of telling them!" Eileen thought, but she kept the thought to herself. And later, when Belle, secure in the knowledge that no one would invade their privacy, had put on a Japanese kimono and curled herself up on the drawing-room sofa for a comfortable Sunday afternoon nap, she slipped up-stairs and, putting on an old

serge skirt and wrapping a soft shawl over her head and shoulders, stole out for a stroll in the garden.

What she felt she needed was solitude to think; and there, pacing up and down the moist paths between the overhanging trees, she found it.

Now, on their first settling in the country, was the time to take a firm stand. She knew by cruel experience how easy it is to create a false impression, how much more difficult it is to act the truth than to tell it. A short retrospect of their doings in the few years that had elapsed since their father's death, revealed plainly wherein the mischief had begun.

If only they had been sincere—"Honest in the sight of all men,"—what heartburnings and humiliation they would have escaped. The unceasing strain of trying to keep up appearances that, strive as they might, refused to stay up, had rendered her old and weary while she was yet young. Pacing up and down in the early dusk of the winter evening under the leafless branches, Eileen Fleming resolved that never again would deception hold a part in her life. Never again would she seek to appear other than she was.

"And how utterly *footle* it has all been!" she was saying half aloud, when the sound of a gong

beaten discordantly by the lusty Cecilia warned her to return.

"Well, all that is over now. But it will be impossible for me to keep things in a straight course if I act alone," Eileen thought as she retraced her steps. "I must get Belle to agree with me, and that won't be easy."

The buttered toast was keeping warm on a brass trivet before the fire when she entered the cosy room; and Belle, evidently in high good humour, was seated by the tea-tray eager to impart the very latest information.

"What do you think Cecilia has been telling me? That ugly man with the nice voice is Dr. Gundry. He lives in the queer house with the battlemented wall that we passed on the way from the station. He is a bachelor, and Cecilia says he won't have a woman in his house. He keeps only male servants. He is quite rich, and doesn't really require to practise; but the people all about here have such faith in him that they won't trust anybody else. He is heir to his aunt, Mrs. Chalfont, who owns Uplands Court, about a mile out of the village."

"So this fascinating and wealthy person is a doctor?" said Eileen, raising her dark eyebrows quizzically.—"Then you'll be sick to-morrow!"

"I shall be sick to-night," quoted Belle, colouring a little as she laughed. "But seriously, Eileen, I have been thinking how absurd it is that we should condemn ourselves to live in this ridiculously economical fashion. Nobody is anybody in the country, except they keep a conveyance of some kind. If we want to enjoy living here, we really must get a little carriage, even if we pinch in something else."

"I thought we had agreed to keep out of debt?"

"We don't need to be in debt. Our income could do it quite well, if only you would give up that Quixotic notion of putting aside a hundred and fifty pounds a year in order to pay back to John Hornecke money that I'm certain isn't of the slightest importance to him."

"And where would we get money to buy this equipage?"

"You forget that we won't need any new clothes for a year at least. To judge by the antediluvian garb worn at church, those we have now are years before the Strete Tything fashion. So that will be a saving; and in the country I'm sure you could pick up quite a decent pony and trap for forty or fifty pounds."

"Where is the fodder to come from? And who

is to groom the precious animal if we do get him?" Eileen spoke dryly.

"Well, I've been thinking we really require a boy. He would be useful in the house, clean knives and boots, and windows; and oh, do lots of things! And we need him in the garden, too. He would cost very little. Cecilia gets under a pound a month, and a boy would get even less. And if he turned out a smart boy, we could dress him in a buttony suit and call him a page. And——"

"And if we got a bigger boy we could rig him up in a striped waistcoat and call him a footman, and a year or two later we could raise him to be butler and put half-a-dozen flunkeys under him. Oh, Belle, Belle, my dear girl! don't you see where any indulgence of the sort would lead us? Straight back into the pit we have just been helped out of. We got into difficulties simply through trying to appear wealthier than we were,—through striving to get people to believe us richer than we had any right to be thought. I don't really believe our pretentions ever succeeded in taking anybody in. If we did succeed, it was only for a time. And when the people we had deceived discovered how they had been taken in it didn't raise us in their estimation—did it?"

Major Bryson was in both their minds as Eileen spoke. Seeing Belle's face fall, her eyes fill, she went on more gently.

"Belle, dear! We know we can't possibly be rich. For God's sake let us be openly and unashamedly poor!"

## CHAPTER XV

### "Let Dogs Delight——"

"WHAT we want to do here is not to attempt to ape our town life, but to make up our minds to enjoy the country."

It was Monday morning when Eileen spoke thus sagely. They were in the dining-room, which served also as morning-room. Belle, who had been looking out their frilliest underwear to send to the wash, with the idea of impressing their pretensions to gentility on the laundress, and through her on the general populace of Strete Tything, was seated at the table copying out her list in her best handwriting upon monogrammed note-paper.

Eileen, in an easy-chair drawn close to the window where she could bask in the December sunshine, was engaged in the apparently suicidal occupation of cutting a two-inch-deep strip from the hem of a fawn cloth skirt.

"We bored ourselves nearly to extinction last week by staying in every afternoon in expectation of visitors who never appeared. We've been more than a fortnight here, and we've scarcely set foot beyond the village. Suppose we arrange our lives more sensibly, attend to household things in the mornings, and, while the weather keeps mild, go out exploring immediately after luncheon. It is too dark to venture out later."

"It's such a fag holding one's skirt out of the mud," demurred Belle.

For answer Eileen held up her giant scissors and the mutilated skirt. "Cut one dress short for walking in, as I am doing."

"Those rough roads hurt one's feet so."

"Get thicker soles to walk in, then. Surely that's an easy remedy. Why, Belle, you forget how much exercise we used to take in town. We never dreamt of staying a whole day indoors, as we have done here. And we did far more housework, too."

"We had reasons for going about in town. There is nothing whatever to induce one to stir out here."

"Women ruin their lives by sitting at home moping, and waiting for something to happen . . ."

"As though any earthly thing would ever happen in Strete Tything!" Belle's voice was vibrant with scorn. "Still, sitting by a fire is more comfortable than trudging through sodden lanes."

Eileen's patience had come to an end. She used her last argument.

"If you stay indoors, and peek over a fire, you'll get horribly sallow and flabby, and *fat*. And you wouldn't like that. Would you?"

But even the last argument failed of its purpose. Miss Fleming was neither to be cajoled nor threatened. She had made up her mind that she was miserable and illused, and it behoved her to act the part consistently. Besides,—so mixed are motives feminine,—she had just discovered half-a-dozen old yellow-backed novels hidden behind the more sedate volumes of the late Miss Dumbleton's circumscribed library, and it was beyond Belle Fleming's power of self-denial to live in a house with a novel she had not read. An additional allurement towards staying at home lay in the unexpected reappearance of John Hornecke's great box of sweets, which in the confusion attendant upon unpacking had been mislaid. Besides, as she assured herself, there was still a possibility of callers.

So she stayed at home while Eileen, wearing the

curtailed skirt and carrying a stout stick, set forth after luncheon on her first walk of discovery.

Her initial proceeding was to leave a pair of high lacing-boots at the village cobbler's to have an extra sole added to the slim ones that had proved thick enough for town wear. That accomplished, she was free to select her route.

From Strete Tything, which lay in a hollow, many roads seemed to radiate. Avoiding the main thoroughfare which, as she knew, led to Pennyland, Eileen chose another at random, and, walking briskly forward, found herself climbing up and up between high banks that even in December showed little sign of winter, so green were their grassy sides, so many the evergreens that topped their summits.

Her progress was slow, for every few yards some fresh marvel arrested her steps. Sometimes it was a branch whose still clinging leaves showed the glorious tints of autumn; or the vivid orange-hued spike of the wild arum peeping out at the foot of the breast-high fronds of golden bracken.

One thing the town-dweller found oddly gratifying was the absence of humanity. And save for a brood of young fowls clucking about the gate of the solitary cottage she had passed, and a rabbit that,

springing from the hedge, had appeared as greatly surprised to encounter her as she had been to see it, she saw no trace of living creature.

Admiring and picking, Eileen had gone further and risen higher than she suspected, when a sudden opening in the high bank disclosed a view that made her exclaim with delight.

Far beneath her lay the village, its roofs and chimneys veiled in the blue haze from its wood fires. All about was undulating country, the nearer slopes revealing the quaint patchwork divisions of arable ground, the farther hills marked here and there with the dark blue-grey tints that denoted great woods.

The wide expanse of country gained an added glamour from the warm glow of the setting sun.

"Well, Eileen Fleming if you can't be happy in surroundings like these, you're an ungrateful beast," Eileen apostrophised herself, as she turned homewards, her arms laden with the spoil of the winter hedgerows.

The gloaming was past when she reached the cottage. Lamps were lit; and to her lungs, freshfilled with the pure crisp air, the atmosphere of the drawing-room felt hot and stuffy, its air laden with

mingled odours of Chinese tea, toasted tea-cake, naphthaline and cheap perfume.

"Well, I suppose you are dead?"

Belle greeted her sister with an air of commiseration. "You must have lost your way, and you've missed the only visitors we have had yet."

"I'm not dead. On the contrary, I feel quite revived. You don't know what you have missed. While you have been shut up in this stuffy little room, I've had a lovely walk, seen a glorious sunset, gathered all these," exhibiting her armful of plunder, "and fallen in love with Devon. Of course if you've been drinking tea all afternoon, you won't be able to take a cup with me?"

"Won't I? I was so busy with my guests, I had no time to drink mine."

"Well, are you pleased with your visitors, now that they have come?" Eileen asked as she rang for fresh tea. "Go on. I know you are gasping to tell me all about them."

"Do you remember the active-looking little woman who sat by the middle pillar in church and kept screwing her head round to look at us? She came first. Her name is Hewson. They are Leeds people, and came to Devon for her husband's health. He is quite an invalid. She is sure she remembers

Mr. Hewson having consulted father in town. At least she is certain she knows father's name and reputation quite well. She called because she feels it a duty to call upon new-comers, as, being a stranger herself, she can sympathise with them."

"Sweet of her!" murmured Eileen, her utterance muffled by bread and butter.

"She says Strete Tything is a dreadfully dull place. The rector is so often away for his health, that for all the social influence exercised by the rectory we might as well be dissenters. The Pennyland vicar's curate, who takes the duties temporarily, does poker-work for bazaars, and is so nervous that he nearly falls off his cycle if he meets anybody who looks at him. She seems to know everything about everybody."

"A most valuable acquaintance for ignoramuses like ourselves, who know nothing about anybody."

"Mrs. Hewson would have told lots more if two old frumps hadn't come in just as she was waxing confidential."

"How did the frumps look?"

"Unutterable! Things in dolmans who had been to school with Miss Dumbleton, I should say. They wore prunella boots and raggedy fur tippets that had been preserved in naphthaline."

"Gurr—r!" said Eileen, through her closed teeth as she sandwiched a slice of plum-cake between the two last pieces of thin bread and butter. "Naphthaline—That was what I smelt, of course. And the Hewson woman had the cheap scent, I suppose. Well, go on; what then?"

"Well, when Mrs. Hewson saw them (Moate, their name is, and John Hornecke who remembered meeting them here when Miss Dumbleton was alive had written asking them to call for us) she froze up; and as, even at their most effusive, the Moates couldn't be anything but pokerish, you may guess we had a lovely time."

"Poor Belle! I wish I had been here to help you."

"You can imagine our three-cornered conversation. The Moates and the Hewson evidently have a feud on. They wouldn't speak to each other, though all of them spoke to me. I think Mrs. Hewson was determined to outstay the others, for she made no sign of going until the Miss Moate that I imagine the elder said pointedly: 'I heard your poor husband had been worse again. Is it good for him to be left *so much* alone?' Whereupon Mrs. Hewson turned red, and bounced out without even bowing to them. And when she had

gone they looked at each other, and said: 'That obtrusive woman again! Fancy her impertinence in thrusting herself in here!"

"What had she done?"

"Just what I inquired. I said demurely: 'Pray pardon my ignorance, but as strangers we know nothing of chance callers. Who is this Mrs. Hewson?' and then the dreadful facts came out."

"Which were?"

"That Mr. Hewson was really only a clerk or something to a firm in Leeds, and now that he is in bad health his late employers make him an allowance. That his wife is such a gad-about, he gets no attention. That if she can't make any other excuse for forcing herself upon people she will call to borrow a book for her husband to read; when everybody knows that his eyes are so weak that he can scarcely read at all."

A quick step on the flagged path outside was followed by an imperative summons on the knocker.

"The Philistines are upon thee, Samson," whispered Eileen; "here's another 'guy.'"

But the invader proved to
had returned to fetch the
vertently left behind on he
a book—if Mis

lend her husband. He was such an invalid that literature was his only recreation.

If it required little suasion to induce Mrs. Hewson to reseat herself or to accept a cup of the fresh tea, it needed no encouragement whatever to induce her to open out upon the Moates.

"I grieved for your good opinion of Strete Tything society, when I saw the Moates arrive, Miss Fleming. 'What *will* Miss Fleming think of us?' I said to Edgar. 'I pity poor Miss Fleming sincerely if she gets her first impression of Strete society from the Moates!' I'm afraid you would find them dreadfully censorious. They never speak good of anybody, never. But really, country people are shocking in that way. They are so narrow, so shockingly provincial." Mrs. Hewson spoke from the superior standpoint of a towns-lady. "But speaking candidly, with the exception of Mrs. Chalfont of Uplands Court, and the Honorable Arabella Rodd who lives with her, the people of the neighbourhood are nobodies—absolutely nobodies. Why, [illegible]oates, though they profess to be so select, at [illegible]pt a boarding-school! Yes, Miss Flem- you would be horrified. A girls' school [illegible] years ago they retired— [illegible]ling-school retired first"

—Mrs. Hewson cackled a little in enjoyment of her own witticism—" and that they live now on a pittance from a brother in China. But of course in a place like this people will say anything." Mrs. Hewson's contempt for gossip was beautiful to behold.

" And who is Mrs. Chalfont? " asked Eileen, trying to avoid meeting her sister's eye.

" Oh, she is a charming woman, Miss Fleming. *Charming,* positively. Quite the lady-patroness of the district. As I said to her the very last time we met: ' Dear Mrs. Chalfont, the place is absolutely barren in your absence.' She owns that lovely place called Uplands Court."

" Are there big stone pillars at the gate and a lodge? I passed it to-day and wondered who lived there."

" Well," acknowledged Mrs. Hewson, " you can hardly say Mrs. Chalfont *lives* there. As I always tell her: ' You do not *live* in Devon, dear Mrs. Chalfont. You simply *sojourn* there.' She always goes up to London for the season, and stays at the Hyde Park Hotel, returning here in autumn and spending part of the winter at the Court. But last winter she suffered so acutely from rheumatism that Dr. Gundry—you know he is her nephew?—advised

her to winter in Egypt. When she said goodbye, she spoke of remaining in Cairo till February, then pausing at the Riviera on her way back to London. We won't see her here till next autumn I fear."

Mrs. Hewson sighed as though suffering a personal calamity.

"Did you say Dr. Gundry was her nephew?"

"Yes, Miss Fleming. If he plays his cards well, he should inherit Uplands Court. Mrs. Chalfont always intended him to have it. It was a long time before she forgave him for insisting on studying medicine. He was quite independent, and she rightly thought it beneath the dignity of the family."

"I'm afraid you will find the village dull, Miss Fleming." Having exhausted Mrs. Chalfont as a topic, Mrs. Hewson returned to more personal matters. "I did, and do still, I assure you. When I first came to Strete Tything I was certain I would never be able to endure it. After Leeds it seemed such a wretched, deadly dull place. You know Leeds? No? Oh, well, it is a most sociable town. Quite delightful to reside in. Always something going on. Coming from London, *you* can imagine what a change I felt it to leave a wide circle of friends and settle in this dismal village. So we can sympathise with each other, for a more backbiting,

scandal-mongering place than Strete Tything I never saw."

"Well?" said Belle interrogatively, when their visitor, inflated by the triumph of having by strategy succeeded in wresting from the unconscious Moates the glory of the last word, had at length departed, bearing off her recovered umbrella, and the borrowed volumes.

"Well!" answered Eileen.

And then they both burst out laughing.

## CHAPTER XVI

### Dr. Felix Gundry

A FEW more of the winter days crept past without bringing the Open Sesame of the Strete Tything society to its new inhabitants.

They had put on their best bibs and tuckers, meaning to return Mrs. Hewson's call; but on that lady's doorstep they learnt from an untidy maid-of-all-work that her mistress was out. Belle's inquiry as to whether Mrs. Hewson had any special afternoon at home was met by the laconic reply:

"Her bean't never in."

The Misses Moate having, with much ceremony, impressed upon their new acquaintances the fact that they received upon the first Friday of each month; and their introductory visit having been paid on the Monday succeeding the opening Friday of December, the sisters were constrained to let nearly a month elapse before calling upon them. Thus their tentative excursions into acquaintanceship for the moment ended in a *cul-de-sac*.

The more desirable folk of Strete Tything discussed the new occupants of Beulah Bank, and found it difficult to place the smartly dressed young ladies who all unheralded had taken up their abode there. Through the agency of the Campkins family rumours as to the magnitude of the Flemings' late possessions got into circulation, with the effect of arousing doubts that added to the perplexity of the situation.

If the Misses Fleming had kept carriages and men-servants, and had given big entertainments and led fashionable lives so recently in London surely it was odd, to say the least of it, that they should suddenly be reduced to living in a tiny cottage served by one maid? So argued the neighbours, who agreed that a little delay in calling might be advisable: that at any rate no harm would be done by inaction.

Probably in Mrs. Campkins' desire to exalt her daughter's employers, her accounts of their vanished grandeur gained something of a Munchausen exaggeration. Certain it is that the innate conservatism that constitutes the country dread of an incomer thrives in these inland districts. Had the Flemings elected to reside at one of the seaside towns where were settled many people who, like

themselves, wished to get the best value out of a small income, they would have met a ready welcome. But at Strete Tything, where half-a-dozen families at most constituted Society, that half-dozen were so fearful of risking their position that it behoved them to be specially wary whom they admitted within their charmed circle.

At the root of the matter lay something of the unvoiced antagonism of the rustic for the invading townsman. That vague jealousy harboured by the countryman against those whose presence ruffles his self-complacency by a tacit suggestion that his methods may be behind the times; that the hue and cut of his raiment are just a shade out of fashion; that his speech reveals more than a trace of the rural intonation.

Be the cause what it might, the fact remained that no one else called; and the total absence of excitement preying on her mercurial spirits, Belle Fleming began to mope.

Late November had been the worst possible time of year for beginning a residence in the country. Two months earlier there would have been the glory of Autumn to rejoice their eyes. A couple of months later the promise of Spring would have awakened their interest. Now, right in the heart

of the dead season, a few weeks of inaction told upon Belle Fleming's health. She became listless, did not eat. Eileen suspected her of brooding over the recalcitrant Major. And when she reached the stage of declaring it too much trouble to dress because they had nothing to dress for, Eileen took alarm and kept her threat of calling in Dr. Felix Gundry.

Even the bare prospect of his visit had the magic effect of cheering the invalid's drooping spirits. She began at once to pick up. For the first time in a week she took pains with the dressing of her pale golden hair. When Eileen set out to walk to the Doctor's house, she left Belle, decked in a becomingly appropriate tea-gown, reclining gracefully amid the heaped-up cushions of the drawing-room sofa. Beside her on a small table were such invalid requirements as a smelling-bottle, a fan, a *bonbonnière,* and a volume of poetry.

Twenty minutes' quick walk along the Pennyland road brought Eileen to the gate of Dr. Gundry's house. The portal, set in the battlemented wall, that had piqued Belle's curiosity as they drove past on their day of arrival, was closed. Eileen's summons on the formidable door-knocker brought a man-servant.

Dr. Gundry was out. He was expected back presently. On his return he would at once get the message.

A little disappointed,—why, she scarcely knew; perhaps because she had failed to catch a glimpse of what lay behind that baffling battlemented wall,—Eileen turned to walk home. Noting an attractive-looking by-path that she was certain led back to Strete Tything, and never doubting that she would arrive there in good time for the Doctor's visit, Eileen, forsaking the highway, chose to return by it.

The road twisted about, and after the manner of Devon ways merged into other roads. At no time was Eileen blessed with a sense of locality. Two hours had elapsed before, hot and vexed, she found her way back to the village. As she came within sight of the cottage, a horseman was just leaving the gate.

"Oh, Belle, I'm so sorry! I took a wrong turning and came miles round. I thought I'd never reach home. And—— But what is the matter?"

She spoke in alarm, for the Belle she encountered on her return, a being afire with outraged pride, was a different woman from the lackadaisical invalid she had left.

"Didn't Dr. Gundry come? I thought I met him riding away as I got home."

Belle laughed scornfully.

"Oh, yes! he *came*."

"Well?—Do tell me what he said."

"Said! It's a good thing he isn't dependent on his practice for his living. That's all I can say. I don't understand how anyone can endure him. He told me in so many words that there was nothing wrong with me but idleness!"

"Well, you know, Belle," Eileen hinted tentatively, "there *is* something in that. He was not altogether wrong."

Miss Fleming did not condescend to argue the point.

"Imagine what a boor the man must be. No *gentleman* would have insulted a lady in her own drawing-room by telling her that she was simply suffering from a severe attack of *ennui*."

"Did he prescribe anything?"

"He said he could give me tons of drugs, but that nothing would do me so much good as a brisk walk."

The length, breadth, and depth of Belle Fleming's contempt could be gauged by her tone.

"Did his voice sound as melodious to-day as it

does in church?" Eileen asked mischievously. She felt secretly relieved that at least Dr. Gundry's visit had had the desirable effect of rousing Belle from her apathy.

"Melodious! A *croak*. A hateful overbearing croak. Ugh! he is altogether detestable. I wish I hadn't put on this tea-gown. It is unlucky," she added with seeming irrelevance; but remembering that the last occasion on which she had worn it was that of Major Bryson's unproductive interview, Eileen understood and was silent.

However ruffling Dr. Gundry's advice may have proved to his patient's vanity, it certainly exercised a salutary effect in revivifying her. Scold as Belle might in her virtuous indignation, and threaten as she did in her righteous wrath that nothing would induce her to follow the advice of such a churl, the very next day saw a pair of her high boots sent to the cobbler's to be re-soled, and witnessed Miss Fleming, malediction on her lips, aggressively shearing the superfluous length off a walking-gown.

There are worse things than a good healthy antipathy. In Belle's case it proved bracing. She flouted Dr. Gundry's advice but she followed it. Instead of spending the short winter afternoons

lazing over a fire, the sisters occupied them making the acquaintance of their surroundings.

The first walk was something of a trial to Eileen, for Belle started with the evident intention of proving the exertion to be quite beyond her feeble strength. Instead of exploring one of Eileen's newly-discovered ways, she insisted upon keeping to the Pennyland road on the plea that it was almost level, and consequently less exhausting than a more hilly path would be.

Whatever her unspoken desire, they passed the Battlements and, after walking half a mile farther on, retraced their steps to Strete Tything without encountering Dr. Gundry. Still, though Belle affected to be overcome by the unaccustomed exercise, Eileen was pleased to see that her appetite had improved, and to note that she spent an interested evening arranging the renovation of several of her last season's hats.

With the near approach of Christmas, much discussion had arisen with regard to the advisability, under existing circumstances, of sending any substantial Christmas remembrance to the Hornecks, whose hearty invitation to visit them they had thought it wisest, for varied reasons, to decline.

"It seems stupid to shower gifts upon people to whom we are so heavily indebted. Imagine the absurdity of expecting them to say 'Thank you' for a few shillingsworth of trash, when we owe them hundreds of pounds!" argued Belle.

"Still we have always given the Horneckes something at Christmas. It would be queer to stop at the very time we are in their debt."

"And yet it would be wicked to spend money buying things to give them, while the money we spend would be really theirs. John would be sure to laugh. He always laughs at us."

It was Eileen who at length lit upon the bright idea of sending the Hornecke household its Christmas decorations ready made. And the labour of gathering the richly-berried holly in the woods, and of making its glossy green leaves and shining scarlet fruit into wreaths, kept them for several days healthfully and cheerfully employed.

"For once the Horneckes' Christmas decorations won't consist of five-shillings'-worth of greenery stuck about the picture-frames and electric-light brackets, just as the housemaids like," Eileen declared complacently as, their hands protected by old gloves, they packed the wreaths in various large bandboxes ready for the post; and then began the

more delicate labour of preparing the table-decorations for the Horneckes' Christmas dinner.

In her younger relatives' opinion, Mrs. Hornecke was absolutely devoid of taste. She prided herself upon having all the things about her rich and genuine; farther her discernment did not go. It was good Mrs. Hornecke had always been well off. As a poor woman she would never have succeeded in getting more show for her money than her actual outlay entitled her to.

"What can you expect from a woman who allows her parlour-maid to arrange the flowers when she has a big dinner?" Belle had once inquired indignantly as they drove home from a party at Wilton Square, when the result of considerable expenditure was a confusion of incongruous blooms thrust haphazard into stolid-looking silver vases. "If Aunt Hornecke had only let me do them! But when I suggested it, she said Burton would be offended if she allowed anyone else to arrange the flowers. Burton—pooh!"

Ethereal Christmas roses that bloomed in the most sheltered corner of the kitchen-garden; strange pods of the gladdon iris, their half-open valves revealing the vivid scarlet seeds within; long feathery sprays of the wild clematis; and fresh green fronds of the

polypod fern from the hedgerows, grouped under Belle's artistic eye, and carefully packed in damp moss, made seasonable bouquets whose sincerity even John Hornecke could hardly question.

As a matter of fact, during the previous winter, their self-constituted censor had chosen to rail foolishly—even the best of men is occasionally pig-headed—at the flagrant artificiality of a gift of certain branches of *pyrus Japonica* manufactured from rose-red tissue paper and varnished twigs. The result had been an amazingly effective imitation of nature; but during the months that the spurious Japonica decorated the big Chinese vase in Mrs. Hornecke's drawing-room her step-son rarely passed it without a flout.

"We've got to go through with it," Belle had said philosophically, when the festive season found them alone in their exile. "Though, except for the Hornecke's turkey and plum-pudding, there is really nothing to remind us that it is Christmastime."

Perhaps the hardest thing to bear was that unsatisfied feeling of expectancy, the anticipation of an intangible something that never happens, that proves the curse of the lonely at times of general gaiety. The Flemings had not altogether been forgotten, but the perfunctory remembrance revealed by sun-

dry printed avowals of good-will failed to touch their hearts.

Any secret hopes Belle still treasured regarding the state of Major Bryson's affections were doomed to rough disillusionment. Womanlike, she had persuaded herself that his sudden defection was caused by no fault of his own. She had taught herself to believe that though some point of honour prevented the declaration of his attachment, he still cherished such deep feelings regarding herself that it was only by the exercise of stern determination that he succeeded in maintaining a resolute and noble silence.

This beautiful and comforting theory has proved a tried solace to generations of neglected feminine hearts. So it was a galling shock to Belle Fleming to receive on Christmas morning a formal stereotyped expression of Major Bryson's good wishes. She wondered bitterly how many similar cards, addressed in the Major's neat caligraphy and enclosed in Club envelopes, had gone forth to the world. Had it been but a twopenny card chosen expressly for herself, she would have welcomed and prized it. But to receive from him a message of greeting identical with many others issued circular-like Belle esteemed an insult.

Tearing the card in two, she threw it into the fire,

and resolutely set herself the task of banishing the Major from her thoughts. Though her regard for Major Bryson had been purely sentimental, the abrupt realisation that he held her cheap was none the less hard to bear.

Probably her hidden irritation was responsible for her snubbing Dr. Gundry, who, conscious that he might have treated his new patient a trifle cavalierly, advanced as they left the church after service on Christmas morning with the evident intention of speaking.

Belle did not choose to see his hand. With a chilly bow—she thought it dignified, but it was merely stiff—she passed on to where the officious Mrs. Hewson was waiting in readiness to pounce upon her.

"I'm sure Dr. Gundry meant to speak to us," Eileen protested later. "I wish you hadn't snubbed him so openly. On Christmas morning, too!"

"It would take a great deal more than any snubbing of mine to lower Dr. Gundry's opinion of himself," snapped Belle. And Eileen, guessing that she already half regretted her rudeness, and suspecting that that was not her only cause for spleen, wisely dropped the subject.

## CHAPTER XVII

### Alterations and an Accident

THE opening of the new year brought a brisker movement of life at Beulah Bank.

The nostalgia that had overshadowed the early weeks of the Flemings' residence at Strete Tything once conquered, the exiles began to realise the pleasant possibilities of country existence; so they spoke no more of shaking the village dust from off their feet and returning to London. And in the process of making the most of their cottage-home the ingenuity that in town had enabled them to maintain an appearance of affluence upon small outlay, and had gained them their nickname of the Misses Make-Believe, proved of inestimable service.

In a laconic note typewritten upon office paper, John Hornecke had inquired if there was anything he could do to make his tenants more comfortable. Immediately on receipt of an answer stating that

the sitting-room carpets were shabby, and that certain paper and paint called aloud for renewal, he had replied by offering *carte blanche* in the matter of re-decoration, and by promptly ordering carpets to be despatched to Beulah Bank.

"Such handsome carpets, too! so soft and thick. They must have cost pounds and pounds. But *green,* of all colours! Oh, why did John not consult us? Imagine a moss-green carpet and blue repp chairs!" sighed Eileen, thinking of the drawing-room.

"A moss-green carpet and maroon upholstery!" wailed Belle tragically, the dining-room before her mind's eye. "There is only one remedy. We can't cover up the new carpets; we must cover up the old furniture. The question is, with what?"

It was Eileen who remembered the two pairs of violet plush curtains that, much against her guardian's wish, she had insisted upon reserving when the fittings of their town-house were sold off. And Belle, whose artistic taste evolved for the drawing-room a scheme of decoration whereby a green-striped satin paper and creamy paint replaced the faded blues of wall and wood. The plush, judiciously cut, made rich covering for the chairs and couch, and for the seat contrived by the village car-

penter to fit across the out-jutting window, while leaving enough for a pair of narrow curtains to supplement those of creamy lace.

"I've got an idea!" Belle exclaimed, bursting in upon Eileen who was in the kitchen poaching eggs for luncheon.

"So have I. I'm going to get hens and incite them to lay eggs for us. Ridiculous, that eggs should cost as much in the country as in town. Twopence each these cost, and we can't afford to pay that," replied Eileen, as she neatly scooped up the eggs with a slice and popped them on the rounds of buttered toast. "A paper I read yesterday said you could keep one hen on the scraps left by each member of a family. I've a great mind to get three fowls and try."

"But listen, Eileen. This is a splendid idea—almost an inspiration. We are doing up the drawing-room in a harmony of lilacs and greens. Suppose we carry the scheme out of doors as well. The climbers up the house—the great wistaria and the clematis—will all have mauvish flowers, and the shrubs by the front fence are lilacs. Suppose we restrict all the flowers in the borders and round the lawn to the different shades of purple and violet, and call the house"—she paused a moment to give

fuller effect to her conception—"and call the house Lavender Lea!"

Once fairly interested in a project, Belle Fleming spared herself neither time nor trouble in its accomplishment. Her improvements did not end with the renovation of the drawing-room, and the rechristening of the house.

The dining-room, stripped of its heavy crimson flock paper, looked twice the size with its walls covered by a cheerful design, at wide intervals on whose cream ground nasturtiums climbed towards a frieze festooned with the same blossoms.

The paint also had been cream-tinted, and panels of the nasturtium paper decorated the doors. The ugly faded maroon of the chairs and sofa was concealed by covers of dainty chintz.

"Good old Miss Dumbleton wouldn't know her house now," Belle had declared triumphantly, when at length she saw her idea approaching the dignity of an accomplished fact. And Eileen cordially agreed with her.

She too had found a new and engrossing occupation—that of studying the art of gardening. The old man, who by reason of some former service had assumed a right to the oversight of the garden, presuming upon the hopelessness of her ignorance,

had adopted a proprietary air in connection with her little domain, and chose to receive her suggestions with a patronising tolerance under which Eileen writhed, though in her utter ignorance of matters horticultural she did not know how to combat it.

"If an uneducated old humbug like Deeble has had wit enough to learn gardening, why shouldn't I?" she counselled herself, and resolved secretly to study the science until she was in a position to dispense, as far as possible, with the assistance of the complacent and rapacious Deeble, whose charges for time devoted to the performance of mysterious and curiously non-evident services weekly amounted to more shillings than she felt their income justified them in expending.

One February day Belle walked into Pennyland to get certain brass tacks required for the completion of her upholstery. She had made her purchase, and was on her homeward way, when a startling little incident occurred.

There had been a big hunt half-a-dozen miles away that morning, and the never busy road seemed more deserted than usual. A fox-terrier, evidently intent on some business of his own not altogether unconnected with rabbitting in the high hedge-banks had lopped by with easy gait. Otherwise for the

last half-mile she had encountered nothing. She was walking briskly on, her mind chiefly concerned with the method of cutting out the violet plush curtains to the best advantage, when a racing motor, turning the curve of the road without warning, dashed past within a few inches of her.

So close had been the threatened impact, that Belle was standing breathless and nerve-shaken, unable to move, when a sharp cry of pain that sounded from the road beyond as the car flashed onwards made her heart stand still. Could there have been an accident?

The motor had already vanished in the distance, and as the trail of vapour gradually dispersed she saw, lying in the middle of the road, a small huddled form.

Nauseated by the evil odour, and sick at heart, Belle hastened on as fast as her trembling limbs would allow, to find the fox-terrier, who only a few moments earlier had lopped so gaily by, full of the joy of life, lying prostrate where the recklessly driven machine had left him.

Full of compassion, and fearful if the dog remained lying right in the cart-track worse might happen, Belle lifted the helpless creature to remove him to a place of safety. As she raised him in her

arms he cried again piteously, then cowering back in her grasp shivered a little, moaning. It was a cold raw day, and Belle, sitting down on the bank, held him close under the warmth of her fur-lined coat.

There was no outward sign of injury—no blood, no evidence of broken limb, yet from the first Belle seemed to know that the injury was mortal: that nothing she could do would avail. He had ceased to moan, and lay breathing heavily, with half-closed eyes. Evidently he was nearly unconscious, and Belle would have felt relieved but that a strange feeling of aloofness obsessed and saddened her.

As she sat helplessly awaiting she knew not what, her ear caught the sound of a hoof-beat, and with intense relief she watched the approach of a huntsman.

Momentarily the dog's breathing was becoming slower and more laboured. His bulk resting in her arms seemed weightier. Her limbs in their cramped position ached, but she dared not disturb him.

The rider, seeing a young lady seated on a damp bank by the wayside on a February afternoon, glanced at her curiously. Belle put out a detaining hand.

"Can you help me?" she spoke in a hushed voice. "There has been an accident——"

In a moment the huntsman had alighted. As he reached her side, in spite of his disguising pink coat she recognized Dr. Gundry.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked.

For answer Belle gently drew aside the protecting fur, and revealed the wounded dog.

"It was a motor," she whispered.

Next instant every trace of the unsympathetic Doctor she had known had vanished. The man who, regardless of consequences, knelt on the muddy road by her side was a man of strong affections. His dark face was wrung with pity. His voice, vibrant with tenderness, uttered incoherent expressions of endearment.

"Oh, doggie, doggie, what have they done?" Doggie, doggie—what has happened to you?"

At the sound of his master's pitying voice, the dying dog opened its half-closed eyes and made an ineffectual attempt to wag his tail. Then, with a convulsive shudder, he was still.

"Was he yours?"

Belle's voice, tremulous and faltering, broke the silence. Gundry had risen to his feet, and without a word stood looking down at the body that rested on her lap.

"Yes. He was mine."

"I don't think he suffered. He only cried out once," she whispered, with some vague idea of consolation. But Dr. Gundry scarcely heard.

"Seven years . . . seven years we had been companions . . ."

His voice broke. He turned abruptly away. And Belle, the dog still cradled in her arms, sat wordless, tears streaming down her face.

"Come."

He had turned and was speaking in a composed voice. "I must not burden you any longer."

As he spoke he had relieved her strained arms of their burden.

"But won't you keep the coat round him? It is warm."

Gundry shook his head sadly.

"He won't feel cold now."

Then without a word of thanks or farewell he turned, and with the reins over his arm and the dead terrier held close against his breast, walked down the road in the direction of the Battlements; leaving Belle, with tired limbs, unstrung nerves, and harrowed emotions, to make the best of her way back to Strete Tything.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### Thursday, First Proximo

THE morning succeeding the accident to the dog, Belle Fleming, her gown safety-pinned up around her waist, knelt on the drawing-room floor fastening the violet plush to the new window-seat with the brassheaded tacks to procure which she had walked to Pennyland on the previous afternoon.

Engrossed with her work, her ears full of the sound of her own hammering, she had failed to hear either a step on the flagged path outside or a decisive knock at the door.

"Dr. Gundry, ma'am," bluntly announced Cecilia, showing in the visitor.

"Dr. Gundry!" echoed Belle, struggling to her feet, reddening furiously in painful consciousness of her pinned-up skirt, and of the fact that her hair, guiltless of padding, was rolled up in a big untidy knot at the back of her neck.

But Dr. Gundry seemed quite oblivious of her confusion. Approaching without formal greeting, he entered at once into the explanation of his visit.

"I came to thank you for what you did yesterday."

"It was nothing," Belle murmured, oddly pleased to find that after all he *had* recognised her. "I was only too . . ." she paused, just in time to escape banality.

"It meant much to me—and to mine," he added in a lower tone. Then—"Did you notice the number of the car? Or her distinctive lettering?"

Belle shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. The motor flashed past so quickly that it seemed gone almost before I knew it was there."

"It was a racing one. I know the time it passed almost to a minute. I have no fear that it will ultimately be traced."

Gundry's tone was quiet. He neither fumed nor threatened. But in her secret heart Belle thought that, had she wrongs, she would wish a man with a like degree of reserve force to avenge them.

"How is the invalid?" he asked, with an abrupt change of subject, turning a keen professional glance upon her.

"Oh, quite well now, thank you. But I thought you didn't allow that I *was* an invalid," retorted

Belle, in whose mind the memory of their first interview still rankled.

"Not actually an invalid at the moment, perhaps, but in serious danger of becoming one, if you had not been roused up. You feel brighter now? More energy? Appetite improved? Well, that's better. I want you," he added, pausing in his movement towards the door, "to do something to help me with another patient of mine. A young lad—Patman, his name is—at Snag's End is recovering from rheumatic fever. The worst is over, but he still has a weary convalescence to endure. Snag's End is a desolate hamlet right up on the edge of the moors," he explained in reply to her question. "I want you to walk up occasionally and take him a stray magazine or a newspaper—anything in the way of printed matter, except sermons. It would do him more good than medicine."

As the sound of the dog-cart wheels died away in the distance, Belle wondered which of his patients Dr. Gundry anticipated would derive most benefit from this prescription—young Patman by the literature, or herself by the two-mile walk to Snag's End!

It was not until some time after Gundry had gone that Belle became conscious that he had not

given her an opportunity of refusing to do his bidding. But to a woman accustomed to the meaningless deferences of society there was a puzzling fascination about being ordered to do anything by a man who appeared to take unquestioning obedience for granted.

The close of February was signalised by the breaking of the fetters wherewith Deeble, the old-man-of-the-sea gardener, had weighted the novices in gardening.

Eileen who undertook sole supervision of outdoor matters had frequently had occasion futilely to writhe under the superiority of the old man's manner, and the dictatorial way in which he over-ruled her wishes and laughed at her mistakes. Knowing her own helplessness, and fearful of being unable to fill his place did she dismiss him at this, the really busy season of the year, she tolerated his tyranny until one day matters got beyond endurance.

The occasion was of the simplest. Eileen, struck by her own remissness in not having earlier thought of it, suggested at once getting some bulbs of purple crocus and lilac tulips for the spring decoration of their flower-borders.

To her annoyance Deeble, dropping the implement wherewith he had been setting the last row of

early potatoes, broke into a shrill outburst of laughter. "Tee-hee! Tee-hee!" he neighed, slapping his corduroy-covered knee with delight. "Listen to that now. 'Buy 'e some bulbs, Deeble,' she says, says she. An' it well on in Feb'uary. Tee-hee! If that beant a good 'un. The best yet." His further remarks, being disguised in the broadest Devon dialect, were beyond Eileen's comprehension.

Earlier in the day he had annoyed her by chuckling for quite ten minutes after she had made innocent inquiry as to when the potatoes he was engaged planting would be ready for "pulling." She was aggravated by a haunting—and not altogether foundationless—notion that Deeble was gaining a local reputation for wit by retailing her horticultural misconceptions in the village tavern.

Hot with indignation, she hastened into the house and, consulting a gardening-book, was by no means soothed to find the hilarious Deeble was right, and that only one lamentably ignorant of the A.B.C. of floriculture would have failed to be aware that bulbs for spring blooming should have been planted in autumn.

Naturally the very fact that he was right and she wrong, tended to make her wrath burn more fiercely.

"I shan't condescend to bandy words with an unintelligible old idiot like that," she avowed in high dudgeon. "But out of this garden he goes to-night, and I'll take care he never enters it again."

Straightway sitting down, she penned a formal note informing Mr. Deeble that the Misses Fleming having no further need of his services, would be obliged by his at once sending a note of their indebtedness to him for the last three days' work.

Deeble thus summarily disposed of, Eileen began in earnest to enjoy herself. With the glorious enthusiasm of the rank amateur she plunged rashly into gardening. The ground happily had been dug and was in prime condition for her labours. Much can be learned by an intelligent mind from the instructions in the nurserymen's catalogues and the directions on seed-packets. And Eileen on the whole succeeded amazingly, though she did commit the solecism of sowing celery, cucumber, and ten-week-stock seed in the open ground early in March.

Luckily a high brick wall secured her labours from prying eyes, and old Deeble, though he lurked about curious to know how things were going on, caught no hint of how matters progressed in his usurped kingdom. His inquisitiveness baffled, he solaced himself by assiduously spreading a report

in the village to the effect that lack of funds had been the sole reason for the ladies dispensing with his invaluable services.

The garden at last her very own, Eileen for the first few days was perfectly happy. She was up early and out at work; coming in to meals under protest, so eager was she to get all the seeds in the ground while the weather kept fine.

Her zeal ended in a cold which not only put a summary stop to her outdoor labours, but also robbed her of the pleasure of attending the first party to which they had received an invitation since they had left London.

"Twenty years hence I suppose we will have come to regard going to spend an evening at the Moates as quite a wild dissipation!"

Eileen, attired in the undignified comfort of a flannel dressing-gown, was seated in an arm-chair by her bed-room fire watching Belle as she packed her slippers into an embroidered bag.

"In twenty years there will be caps in our bags as well as slippers." Belle spoke gaily. After a succession of weeks of their own company, the prospect of any change was almost exciting.

"And wigs on our heads," croaked Eileen hoarsely. "Oh! Belle, I do wish I hadn't caught

this silly cold. I'm getting blue-mouldy for want of an airing. I'd give my ears to go with you."

Belle shook her head.

"Hear how the wind howls. They'd be deaf ears if you ventured out in such a strong north-east blast. Besides, I'm certain it is going to hail or sleet, or something. You are far safer here by this cosy fire. I'll tell you all about it when I get home. But you mustn't expect anything lively. Don't you remember how dismal it was when we paid that ceremonious visit to the moated grange? How we sat and they sat like graven images in that vault-like drawing-room, talking politely and eating dry seed cake. I loathe seed cake. And they are so prim that they always make me feel garrulous."

Once beyond the comparative shelter of the village and out on the high road, Belle found that the weather was even worse than she had anticipated.

Eileen had urged her to have a conveyance, but for various reasons she had resolutely refused; one being that she grudged having a carriage when there was only one person to occupy it; another that in order to get a vehicle it would have been necessary to send a special messenger into Pennyland.

Luckily the wind was at her back, so Belle made

the best of her way onwards, hoping that the violence of the storm might have spent itself before it was time for her to retrace her steps.

She had covered more than half of the journey, and was nearing the Battlements, when she saw Dr. Gundry in his smart dog-cart, driving towards Strete Tything, evidently bent on some errand of mercy.

She bowed and would have passed on; but to her surprise he stopped his horse.

"As your medical adviser I must order you to turn and I'll take you straight home." He spoke with affected sternness. "It is blowing a gale now, and there's an icy nip in the air. Don't you think it hardly a tempting evening for a promenade?" he asked, looking down quizzically at her storm-tossed locks and wind-rouged cheeks.

"But this is not a promenade," retorted Belle gaily, her spirits high with the prospect of a little society. "You see before you, sir, a guest on her way to a party. Yes, truly." Answering the eyebrows he had uplifted in incredulity with an emphatic little nod of affirmation. "To a party at the Misses Moate's at Acacia Villa. And as this is the very first thing in any way approaching a festivity that this guest has been invited to since

she came to stay in Devon, can you wonder at her braving the elements in order to reach there?"

"How shall you manage about getting home?"

"The storm may have lulled before night. If it isn't ever so much better, I shall order a fly from Pennyland."

"Well, be sure you do," Gundry called out against the wind as he drove away.

Arrived at the Moates' dwelling, Belle was surprised to see no visible sign of merry-making, though the faint light that shone behind the lowered blind of the dining-room window cheered the wayfarer with hopes of a real country tea; a meal to which she felt she could sit down with special relish after her tempestuous journey thither.

A final gust blew her, gasping a little and palpitating a good deal, into the shelter of the doorway, where she paused a moment to recover breath before sounding a joyful "rat-tat" on the knocker.

To Belle's astonishment her summons met with no response. She knocked again more loudly. The hall was dark, but through the clouded glass of the door she caught an impression as of a female form slipping from the dining-room towards the back premises. Two more minutes of waiting passed; then the little maid, hastily tying on a clean apron,

appeared from the kitchen and opened the door, her round face one huge mark of interrogation. Relieved even to get within the safety of stone walls, Belle stepped in, her worst fear that she might have arrived a little too early.

The drawing-room into which the astounded maid had shown her, evidently under silent protest, had appeared vault-like on their last visit, which had taken place on one of the Misses Moate's monthly receiving days. Now, without the carefully restricted fire that on that occasion had smouldered in a wire-basket, and with the furniture shrouded in drab linen pinafores, it was more than ever sepulchral.

"Somebody must be ill—*very* ill," Belle thought, as she paused, almost afraid to sit down on the slippery covers; "and I must have missed the message asking us not to come."

At length to her relief both the hostesses appeared, apparently in their usual ponderous health. They received the excuses for Eileen's absence in an absolute and disconcerting silence.

"I'm afraid I must be a little early," Belle said apologetically, finding the ladies wait in evident expectation of an explanation, though of what she could not fathom. ("Perhaps they thought Eileen

ought to have made an effort to come," she thought). "I understood your note to mention six o'clock. Perhaps I was wrong?"

Miss Moate looked at Miss Eliza. Miss Eliza looked at Miss Moate. Belle looked at them both.

"Do we understand then that you understood our invitation to spend an evening was for to-night?"

Miss Moate put the question in a superior voice, and for a moment Belle felt as though she were back at boarding-school, and having an inquisitorial interview with the Principal.

"Ye—es," she murmured.

"I think if you will examine our written invitation you will find that the date mentioned was Thursday, first *proximo*. That is Thursday of next week, not to-night."

"Oh!" faltered Belle, hot with confusion at her own inexcusable oversight, yet almost inclined to smile at the absurdity of the situation. "If only Eileen had been here to share the joke with me," she thought; then sobered with the sudden recollection of the distance that lay between her and the cottage where Eileen nursed herself snugly by the fire.

"How absurd! I really do not know how we came to make such a stupid mistake. Of course

*proximo* means next month. How ridiculous not to notice that you said *proximo,*" she murmured in an apologetic attempt at palliation. "Still," with a smile, "in spite of my stupidity I have been fortunate enough to find you both at home."

The Misses Moate did not join in their unexpected guest's congratulations. Probably because they knew that there were not half-a-dozen evenings in the year whereon any caller would have found them out.

"We make a point of sending out formal invitations for any little entertaining we do," pronounced Miss Moate, as she drew her gray knitted shawl closer about her shoulders. "When we desire the company of our friends we invite them to come on a definite date, and at a definite hour. In our opinion that is a much more satisfactory method than telling people to come in just when it suits them."

"And of course we also have our regular monthly afternoon 'At Homes,'" chimed in Miss Eliza. "My sister and I do not believe in promiscuous entertaining."

"Unpremeditated sociability is invariably unsatisfactory," added Miss Moate, with the air of one saying the last word upon the subject.

Heated from her battle with the elements, Belle,

on first sitting down, had half unconsciously loosened the fastening of her fur-lined coat. The chill of the room struck through the transparent chiffons and laces of her bodice, and she hastily drew it close again. A vague and almost inconceivable suspicion that her presence on an unnotified date was esteemed an unpardonable intrusion, and that she would not be invited to remain, was beginning to trouble her.

Her hope of a substantial meal had vanished. Still, a cup of hot tea would have been inexpressibly grateful, and she had smelt buttered toast, as she crossed the hall. For an awkward moment she sat silent, painfully conscious of her carefully looped-up evening skirt, and her slipper-bag. But still half trustful that in common humanity they would offer her rest and refreshment.

"It is getting quite dark." Belle spoke with evident reluctance as a sharp patter of hail struck the window. "Perhaps I ought to hasten home."

"The night is drawing on. Do not permit us to detain you," answered Miss Moate with punctilious civility.

For a moment Belle thought of asking them to send to Pennyland for the antediluvian vehicle. But pride forbade her craving even so small a favour

from those who were treating her with such flagrant inhospitality.

As she stood up to go the ladies rose with alacrity.

"We hope to have the pleasure of seeing you and Miss Eileen on Thursday," said Miss Moate.

"The first *proximo*," supplemented Miss Eliza.

"I trust that on that occasion the state of Miss Eileen's health will not preclude her from joining our company," graciously added her sister.

And Belle Fleming found herself on the outer steps of Acacia Villa, the door closed fast behind her, a weary mile and a half of wet and windy road intervening between herself and home.

## CHAPTER XIX

### Behind the Battlements

THE journey towards Acacia Villa had been a difficult one. On the way back Belle had to struggle against the added disadvantage of having the keen blast right in her face.

The first few yards saw her umbrella blown inside out. The end of the first half-mile found her still wrestling desperately on. Her unprotected face was stung by the lashing sleet; her trained skirt, torn from its looping and caught by the wind, acted as a drag to hinder her progress. At the best Belle was not over robust, and her tall figure offered more resistance to the storm than a shorter one would have done. It was a situation that would have tried greater power of endurance than hers.

The road, always a sparsely frequented one, seemed totally deserted. On such a night none was abroad who could stay at home. Belle longed in vain for any conveyance to come by. If she could

have huddled down in the bottom of a cart bound for Strete Tything, she would have thought it a luxury.

Her strength was well-nigh expended, but still with bent head and panting lungs she was striving desperately on, when the gleam of carriage-lamps approaching her shot through the darkness, and her heart sank with the knowledge that the conveyance was going in the opposite direction.

Fearful of being run over on the narrow road, she drew close into the bank, her eyes dazzled by the light from the lamps.

To her mingled relief and astonishment a voice hailed her. It was Dr. Gundry's.

"Hulloa!" he cried, at the sight of her storm-tossed figure, pulling up with a jerk that threw the beautiful bay horse on his haunches.

"What has been wrong? The party isn't over already, surely?"

"There wasn't any party!" Belle's laughter struggled convulsively against her tears for utterance. "It was the wrong night!"

With the confession her overwrought strength completely broke down, and she sank back against the bank.

Sending his groom to the horse's head, Gundry

leapt out, and catching her half-fainting figure, helped her to mount to the front seat of the trap.

"Listen!" He spoke peremptorily, that her wavering senses might grasp his meaning: "You *must not faint.* My house is quite near, and you are going there with me now to rest until my brougham is ready to take you home."

And Belle, clinging tightly to her remnant of consciousness, speedily found herself reclining in a big leather arm-chair by the fire in the Battlements library, a burning taste of brandy on her lips, and a beatific sense of peace on her soul.

For the first few minutes Belle Fleming was content to lie back in the great chair, enjoying the lull after the tempest. New life, born of the potent spirit, coursed through her veins, warming her from toe to finger-tip.

Gundry, who, on seeing her beginning to revive, had wisely left her alone, was standing at a writing-table out of sight, opening the letters that had arrived by the evening post; and Belle unnoticed could take a lazy inventory of such of the surroundings as came within her range of vision.

The room struck her as being oddly characteristic of its owner. On the well-filled bookshelves medical treatises jostled works on country sport. Sundry

mysterious iron-bound mahogany boxes stood cheek by jowl with gun-case and spur-rack on the wall. A much coveted diploma hung suspended between a couple of sporting prints and a variety of hunting-crops. A fox's mask hung over the door leading to an inner chamber, presumably used as a consulting-room. Half-dreamily Belle was trying to remodel her preconceived opinion of her host, when she found that Gundry had left his correspondence, and was standing near silently observing her.

"Better now?"

"Oh, ever so much better, thank you. Quite well, indeed. I really ought to be going . . ."

Attempting to rise to her feet, she was surprised to find herself shaking and feeble; and sank back to her seat with a disquieting sense of her own helplessness.

"Well? Ready to resume your walk to Strete?" Gundry asked half quizzically. "Or will you wait till I give you permission to travel?"

"Perhaps I'd better wait till you allow me to go."

Belle spoke meekly. In her weakness she felt it a relief to have anything decided for her.

"That's right," approved Gundry, ringing the bell sharply.

"Bring some hot soup," he ordered, when the

servant appeared. Then, as though struck by a sudden thought, he said, turning to Belle: "Perhaps you would rather have tea?"

"Oh, if I *might!*"

Belle's tone left no doubt as to where her preference lay.

"Not nearly so good for you. Bring tea, Brown, immediately."

"Now tell me," he said, when they were again alone, "what was the mistake about the party?"

Belle coloured furiously. She was ashamed to confess to the lamentable ignorance she had betrayed; but, with Felix Gundry's keen eyes fixed upon her, she felt as though subterfuge would be futile.

"The invitation—I think I told you it was from the Moates, you know they live about half-a-mile farther on, near Pennyland? Acacia Villa, their house is called."

Gundry nodded.

"Yes, I know. 'The Misses Moate present complimentary regards'—whatever complimentary regards may be—'to the Misses Fleming' . . . I know the formula. I also have been honoured."

"Well," Belle went on, nervously anxious to get her confession over, even though she knew it would

lower her in the eyes of her listener: "the invitation was for Thursday first proximo. And we thought they meant to-day, instead of next Thursday. Eileen had a cold, so I went alone, and—— It was shockingly stupid, wasn't it?"

To her intense relief, Gundry appeared unconscious of anything ridiculous in the mistake.

"And after your travelling in such weather to keep what you believed to be an engagement, you were so unfortunate as to find nobody at home?"

"But they *were* at home. Both of them."

"Then you were culpably foolish not to shelter there till the gale was over. Or until you had secured a conveyance to drive home in."

"But they . . . . I don't think they care much for unexpected visitors."

"Did they not urge you to wait?"

"Well—no."

"Nor offer you refreshment?"

Belle shook her head.

"The Misses Moate do not encourage promiscuous entertaining, and they find unpremeditated sociability invariably unsatisfactory. They told me so."

The epithet whereby Dr. Gundry designated the two estimable ladies under discussion was neither

professional, dignified nor polite, and Belle affected not to hear it, though her slighted heart was comforted by the knowledge of his sympathy.

When tea came he would not allow Belle to move, but insisted upon himself helping her; bachelor-fashion pouring out the fluid from a height, and presenting it with a good head on.

The silver, she noted, was old-fashioned and massive, though dull of lustre, the china fine but mismatched. And Belle noticed that the tasteful touches imparted by a woman were absent.

Even the most overbearing and masterful of men is apt to degenerate into fussiness when the position of housekeeper is without warning thrust upon him. Felix Gundry was no exception.

When Belle rejected the anchovy sandwiches in favour of simple bread-and-butter, he seemed worried at having failed to hit her taste. Hastening from the room, he returned after the lapse of a minute, bearing a bulky parcel which on being opened, proved to contain a large plum-cake.

"There! I knew there must be something of the kind about." He spoke triumphantly, as though by the timely production of a cake he had vindicated his claim to irreproachable housekeeping. "Old Miss Coles at the Crossways baked this expressly

for me. Good soul. She didn't know I never eat sweets."

Glad to gratify her host, Belle accepted a piece of the cake. Unfortunately the first taste revealed that a considerable time had elapsed since the date of worthy Miss Coles' baking. The flavour was distinctly mouldy.

She managed to swallow the bite she had rashly taken, then secretly concealed the remainder of the slice in her lace pocket-handkerchief.

"How is the cake?"

Gundry's tone had betrayed anxiety, and probably Belle's politely untruthful rejoinder: "Very nice, indeed. Delightful," was rendered more emphatic than even civility deemed necessary by her desire to put her host at his ease.

Gundry looked relieved.

"I was afraid it might be rather *old*," he acknowledged. "I don't remember when it was that Miss Coles sent it. But I suppose a good cake keeps a long time?"

"Oh, yes. Almost any time," acquiesced mendacious Belle.

She looked very nice with the glow from the wood fire warming the pale gold of her hair and striking sharp spots of light from the steel sequins

that broidered her transparent black draperies. Probably Gundry thought so, for looking suddenly up, Belle surprised his dark eyes fixed upon her with unmistakable admiration in their expression.

Just then the carriage was announced, and she rose hastily to her feet, welcoming the excuse of action to conceal her self-consciousness. With her movement the handkerchief which she had forgotten fell to the carpet between them.

Seized with quick dismay, Belle bent to recover it. She was too late. The scrap of lace and the incriminating piece of cake were already in Gundry's hands.

For a moment Belle felt inclined to laugh at the exposure of her petty deceit, but a glance at Gundry's face showed that he thought even a trifling insincerity no jesting matter.

Picking up the fur-lined coat that had been hanging over a chair near the fire, he placed it round her shoulders. Then with merely a casual reference to the abatement of the gale, he escorted her to his night-brougham which was waiting at the door to convey her to Strete Tything.

Returning to the library, where the air held a faint impression of the unusual feminine presence, Gundry lifted the token of worthy Miss Coles'

gratitude and threw it into the blazing fire. As the odour of burning plum cake banished the impalpable essence of violets, Gundry stood, one foot on the low fender, watching the spluttering mass, and in his heart reviling the meaningless guile of women.

"Why couldn't she be candid, and say right out that the blasted thing was uneatable?" he demanded, kicking fiercely at the logs that Miss Coles' offering might meet the speedier destruction.

He forgot that, to a woman trained in the niceties of life, a courteous falsehood told with the intention of sparing the feelings of another, ranks as a virtue.

As he turned impatiently from the fire, his foot struck against something that had been lying near Belle's coat. Picking it up, he discovered it to be a bag of dainty needlework. Inside was a pair of black-satin slippers with high red heels.

For a moment a tinge of romance coloured his thoughts, and he handled the foot-gear almost tenderly. Then that slumbering distrust of motives feminine, so commonly experienced by marriageable bachelors at whose heads many caps have been thrown, again reasserted itself.

A woman who could descend to deceit regarding

so trivial a matter as a cake, he reasoned, would assuredly be ready to practice it in other and more important matters. A mean suspicion that in all probability Miss Fleming had purposely forgotten the bag in order, either to have an excuse for calling to reclaim it, or in the expectation that he would call to return it, crossed his mind.

Despising himself the while for the unworthy suspicion, Gundry locked the bag with its contents into a drawer of his desk, resolved to wait and see what would transpire.

## CHAPTER XX

### "Oh, Come ye in Peace"

THOUGH the chill dark days of winter had proved dreary enough to the town-dwellers, with the advent of spring an unwonted excitement awoke in the exiles' hearts. To them everything was new, even wonderful. Their previous experience of the country had centred in autumnal visits to seaside resorts, where the nearest approach to Nature lay in the gardener-tended flower-beds bordering the esplanades. Now the wonder-book of the spring was opening its countless leaves before them.

For the first time in her life Eileen had been able to gratify her latent gift for gardening. Her lack of experience was more than counterbalanced by the dual possessions of boundless enthusiasm, and of what old wives call "green fingers": those magic digits that appear to ensure the growth of everything they plant.

When in London it had been she who watered their flower-boxes, gave the pot-plants their weekly

bath, and raised sweet-smelling hyacinths in glasses. Now with the good red earth of Devon to nourish her seedlings, and the soft Devon air to cherish them so that they grew apace, Eileen experienced the real joy of husbandry.

The overgrown strawberry-beds that she had rescued from Deeble's devastating spade were destined to prove a great satisfaction. During frequent hours of the sweet spring days she sat among the matted strawberry-plants, a basket by her side, a trowel in her gloved hands, diligently grubbing up any especially aggressive weeds that threatened to choke the plants. To her delight a remarkable display of bloom, succeeded by an abundant crop of small but very sweet berries, rewarded her patient toil.

Only town folks can experience to the full, the subtle enchantment that lies in growing one's own strawberries!

Anyone fated to live a country life who has not the sole great qualification for it—love of Nature—is as vastly to be pitied as one possessing that all-important qualification is to be envied. Her new-found dilection for gardening opened for Eileen Fleming a wide-reaching and hitherto quite unexpected field of varied delights. To pass the

garden of even the humblest dwelling in her walks was to do it slowly, feeling a personal interest in every plant, and experiencing a quite unwarranted curiosity regarding what species of buried seeds were marked by the folded papers stuck in cleft sticks.

The Fleming invention did not desert Eileen in the practice of her new science. For the preservation of her freshly sown seeds from the depredations of birds she invented a species of original scarecrow, calculated to frighten the most daring of feathered bipeds into the next county. Other gardeners, she noticed, shot or trapped crows and hung them up. Eileen could not shoot, and had she succeeded in catching a bird in a trap she could not have killed it. So she adopted the simpler method of sticking the tail-feathers of a fowl into a large turnip. Suspended above the seed-bed, swayed by every wind that blew, the flagrant unreality of this creature for a time struck terror into the souls of the peculators; and, by the time they had mustered up courage enough to treat him with the contempt he deserved, the seedlings had outgrown the stage tempting to the predatory foes.

To Belle had fallen the lighter task of looking after the front garden. It takes a real garden-lover

to enjoy toiling unseen among vegetables in a kitchen-garden as did Eileen. Almost anyone can derive pleasure from pottering a little in a flower-bed in full view of the public.

"I don't mind anything I can do dressed," Belle had declared; so she undertook the tending of the heliotropes, violets, violas, lavender, asters and purple pansies that decorated the lawn-beds, the pruning of the lilac-hedge and the training of the wistaria, clematis and passion-flowers that were to justify the cottage in its new designation of Lavender Lea.

Ever governed by a sense of the æsthetic fitness of things, Belle yearned to "dress the part" by wearing raiment of corresponding hue. Restrained by the urgent necessity for strict economy, she resolved to make the most of a last summer's heliotrope muslin, and expended coin in the very minor purchase of lilac cambric from which to fashion a morning gown.

The rulers of the meagre sociability of Strete Tything, who moved with extreme deliberation in the grave matter of admitting outsiders into their circle, still held in abeyance the position the Flemings were to occupy.

But whatever the ultimate estimate of these self-

elected censors might be, the rustics—those keen judges of what constitutes a lady—had no hesitation in according Miss Fleming the position she claimed. And their implied homage did much to soothe her perturbed spirit.

"I do love a place where the women and girls bob curtsies to one, and the men and boys touch their caps. It makes me *purr!*" she declared. "As for the frumps, now that I have seen them, nothing on earth would ever induce me to associate with them. Ridiculous old goodies!"

Early in spring Eileen had achieved her old ambition, and kept hens, but in as moderate a way as ever poultry-fancier began. Guided by Mrs. Campkins' experience and advice, she had become the proprietor of three healthy, hungry pullets of no particular breed. According to the retailer, they were "crosses" between various notable laying species; but to the novice Houdan, Andalusian, Minorca, Leghorn, or Plymouth Rock, were merely a confusion of terms for the same bird.

It was only after the purchase had been arranged and the fowls were in imminent danger of delivery, that it occurred to Eileen that among her worldly possessions the late Miss Dumbleton had not numbered a hen-house.

Hastily turning over the advertisement-pages of *The Feathered World*, to which she had very recently become a subscriber, Eileen was distinctly annoyed to find that the cheapest price quoted for the most modest of structures was a sovereign.

"I'm certain we can't afford that. When we employed that horrid old Deeble, the garden swallowed up so much more than we had calculated on, that we must stinge now to make up for it. Still, the fowls must sleep somewhere. They can run about the yard during the day. If they escape into the garden, we'll chase them out. But they must roost under cover at night, and we assuredly can't afford to buy a thirty-shilling house to shelter three half-crown hens!"

A chance visit to the lumber-room discovered a bulky old meat-safe: a clumsy article, yet one assuredly capable of accommodating a trio of spinster hens. Possibilities quickly revealing themselves to her ingenious mind, Eileen had this removed to the floor of an empty out-house, where she was soon hard at work with nails, hammer and saw.

Her hands were abraded, her muscles sore, her back aching; but by nightfall she had succeeded in transforming the discarded meat-safe into some-

thing that, viewed with lenient eye, distinctly resembled a hen-house!

Probably the barndoor fowl has little knowledge of poultry architecture; for Eileen's hens not only took possession of their makeshift home without a protesting cackle, but speedily vindicated their purchase by laying eggs industriously therein.

In April Mrs. Hornecke, with whom since leaving town they had sustained a desultory correspondence, wrote kindly suggesting that they should pay her a visit in May. For different reasons the sisters decided to decline her invitation. Eileen, because at that season the garden demanded increasing attention, and she had a hen sitting upon duck's eggs. Belle, because she would not feel happy among her former associates were she clad in last summer's clothes.

One bright afternoon in May, Eileen found herself at a stand-still. Heretofore her zeal and ingenuity had counterbalanced her lack of experience. Now, neither intuition nor common sense could help her, where five minutes' practical instruction would have smoothed the difficulty.

For several evenings lately the Campkins children, encouraged thereto by a trifling pecuniary reward, had been exploring the hedges and highways

in search of sticks wherewith to stake her young peas.

Now Eileen stood, the pile of twiggy branches beside her, gazing in dismay at the double line of seedling peas that she had laboriously staked.

"I don't believe I ought to have stuck the branches up the middle of the rows of peas," she thought. "And yet how else could one do it?"

Belle had been out all afternoon primrose-gathering, but even had she been at hand her advice would have been of small avail. In vain had Eileen consulted the instructions in the seedsman's catalogue or in Miss Dumbleton's old-fashioned book on garden management. These authorities, so prolix of counsel on what Eileen at the moment esteemed less important matters, had chosen to say never a word on the one desired subject. She might have asked Cecilia, but where an expert will not hesitate to crave information, a sensitive tyro prefers to suffer in silence rather than submit to the indignity of confessing ignorance.

She was standing disconsolate, looking helplessly at the skinny line of wobbling sticks, that with infinite trouble she had succeeded in inserting

between the twin rows of young plants, when the sound of nearing footsteps seemed to warn her of Belle's return.

"Belle, do come and tell me how to place those ghastly sticks," she called. Then, becoming instinctively aware of a strange presence, she turned and saw Cecilia approach carrying a card on a salver. Behind her came John Hornecke.

It was six months since their parting, and for the moment Eileen felt taken aback. She scarcely knew their position with regard to their guardian-landlord. He had acted towards them with the utmost generosity, but that his opinion of them and all their ways was a severe if not utterly condemnatory one she was fully aware.

His manner, at no time plausible, had of late years been marked with so much tacit reproof, that Eileen naturally exaggerated the contempt in which he held them. She longed for the day when by dint of rigid economy they would have saved enough money to repay his loan. Then and then only would she believe herself reinstated in his respect.

A little to her surprise, and greatly to her relief, Hornecke seemed to feel the constraint of their meeting almost as much as she. The knowledge

had the effect of at once putting her at her ease, and she welcomed him cordially.

"I was in Parkeval on business, and as there were some papers requiring signature I thought it might save us all time and correspondence if I brought them in person instead of posting them."

"It was good of you." Eileen's hand, released from her leather glove, was warm, its clasp friendly. "Belle is out gathering primroses. I expect her any moment."

John laughed half caustically.

"I can hardly imagine Miss Fleming gathering primroses, any more than without seeing you do it I could have imagined you—what was it you were doing?" he glanced round—"staking peas."

"But that's just what the bother is. It is ignominious to confess it," laughed Eileen, determined not to take offence, "but I have been trying my hardest all afternoon, and I find I *can't* stake peas. You are a very learned person; perhaps you can tell me how?"

Hornecke blinked in a puzzled way at the line of sticks, then shook his head gravely.

"That is one of the few things regarding which I must plead ignorance."

"But this is a rude way to treat a guest," cried

Eileen, suddenly awakening to a sense of her duty as a hostess. "If you have been travelling, you must be dying for tea. Let us go indoors and order it at once."

In that swift readjustment of preconceived impressions that takes place on friends meeting after even a short absence, Eileen thought John looking a little older than she had remembered him. Viewed in the strong sunshine, touches of grey flecked the dark brown of his thick beard. As for John, coming thus unexpectedly upon his ward in her gardening trim, her short serge frock half covered by a big apron, a shady hat on her wavy brown hair, he mentally admitted that for once she was suitably attired, for once sensibly occupied.

Her visitor insisting on waiting for tea until Belle had returned to share it, Eileen sped the time by taking him on a tour of inspection round the grounds. If you are not certain how best to entertain a guest, it is a safe plan to introduce subjects that interest yourself. Then one at least of the twain is certain to be amused.

With the enthusiasm of a rank amateur, Eileen showed Hornecke the warm border where the spinach was almost ready for picking, and the bed

where she had that morning sown the French beans; and pointed out the row of tall sticks placed in readiness for the as yet embryonic scarlet-runners that were destined to shoot up and form a screen for the weed-heap.

When she revealed their reason for anticipating a goodly crop of wall-fruits, John surprised her by the warmth wherewith he recalled boyish holidays spent at the cottage in worthy Miss Dumbleton's time, speaking with that affectionate regard which even the least epicurean of mortals accords to edibles, of the abundance of yellow and red gooseberries, and of the flavour of certain white currants for which the garden had once been noted.

Those of the gooseberry-bushes that still survived were gnarled, mossy and unproductive. The white currants had vanished completely. But the apple-trees that he remembered were laden with blossom.

"This used to be called my tree. The apples it bore I considered my special property. They were always kept for me," he said, pausing before a bloom-laden tree, something of wistful longing for the pleasures of his bygone youth in his tone.

"And it always shall be yours, John," cried Eileen impulsively, as she darted forward and for a

moment was half-hidden by the masses of pinky-white blossom.

"See!"

Looking where she pointed, he saw that she had stuck his visiting-card, which half unconsciously she had carried in her hand, in a crack of the bark.

"There! You have taken formal repossession of this tree. Now nobody but you dare touch the fruit!"

As she smiled at him from amid the flowery branches, her hat thrust aside by contact with an obtrusive twig, fragrant petals resting on her ruffled brown hair, Hornecke thought he saw a trace of the winsome little girl he remembered of yore.

In truth it was long since he had seen Eileen to advantage. We never are our natural selves with those whom we have reason to suspect disapprove of us. The very consciousness that they incline to view us with disfavour, by putting us on the defensive, makes us aggressive in manner.

Emboldened by his softened attitude, she confided in him about her hens; and though he laughed a little at the sight of their makeshift home in the old meat-safe, and jested when he heard of the

rigid account she kept of the value of eggs received as against her outlay, he seemed pleased at the prospect of having undeniably fresh eggs for tea.

She was just in process of introducing him to Mrs. Brown-Jones, the worthy hen who was busily engaged in bringing up a thriving family of fluffy yellow ducklings, when Belle arrived; and with her appearance, in some way difficult of explanation, the sunshine seemed to leave the day.

For one thing, Belle had not seen the John of the last hour. To her he was still the disapproving guardian, the strict censor of their expenditure; and his unheralded appearance at once suggested the possibility of some fresh calamity.

The papers—which proved to be of small moment—signed, and tea over, the fly from the Setting Sun at Pennyland appeared to take Hornecke to the station in time for the evening train to Parkeval, where he would catch the London express.

"Fancy John Hornecke bothering to come here, when a letter would have done quite as well!" Belle said as they turned from the gate after watching him drive away. "It gave me a shock when I saw him. I thought he must have come to tell us more bad news. I suppose it was really curiosity to see if we were plunging into debt that

brought him prying here. I hope what he did see set his mind at ease."

"I don't think we need make John a bugbear. Though he doesn't like us, he behaved very generously; and this afternoon, before you came back, he was really quite nice."

"You are the last person I'd expect to find glorifying John Hornecke," said Belle. "I'm sure you used not to think anything too bad to say against him. If you remember, only last summer——"

But Eileen, aware of the advisability of carrying the war into the enemy's country, stemmed the threatened flow of reminiscence by drawing her sister's attention to the unwarranted appearance of sundry weeds between the red tiles of the flagged path; a part she was supposed to keep in order. Consequently Belle, whose gardening was more effective than painstaking, feeling it incumbent upon her to defend her own reputation, abandoned the attack on that of their guardian.

## CHAPTER XXI

### Mrs. Hornecke Takes a False Step

JOHN HORNECKE'S unexpected dip into village life was followed by certain pleasant little ripples on the usually placid surface of existence at Strete Tything.

No class of people is so readily gratified by a little gift as the comparatively rich. The poor are apt to accept offerings as their due, while the better-off never cease to regard even the most trifling bestowal with pleased surprise.

Mrs. Hornecke wrote thanking them so warmly for Belle's primroses, and for the gift of eggs that her step-son had conveyed to London, that the donors felt constrained to forward to Wilton Square a further supply of new-laid eggs, packed at the bottom of a hamper of hyacinth blue-bells and feathery wild sanicle.

John Hornecke had not written personally. But two days after his return Eileen received by post the handsomest edition of the latest work upon

gardening that he had been able to procure. So superfine was it that often when Eileen ran in from the garden to seek its advice, the contrast between her soil-stained person and its delicate binding seemed so great that, hesitating to draw from its garnered wisdom, she consulted instead the use-marked old volume she had discovered in the book-case.

When writing to thank her guardian, Eileen confessed that a glance over the hedge of the nearest cottage-garden had shown her that the stakes should have been placed at either side of the double line of peas, with the tips inclining inwards.

"When I remember that single line of skinny sticks wobbling between the rows of pea-plants, I get hot all over with shame, to think that I ever expected the peas to climb it," she wrote. "As it is, I can't be too thankful for the high wall that surrounds our garden. I think Providence must have erected it specially to screen my horticultural mistakes from the villagers—especially old Deeble who would glory in retailing them."

Hornecke was not much of a letter writer. His laconic note written in reply bore a mysterious reference to his belief that the hens that laid such

remarkably fresh eggs deserved more luxurious housing—a statement that Eileen was disposed to resent as a slight on her converted meat-safe. She understood the writer's allusion better when, one wet June afternoon a few days later, a carrier's waggon from Pennyland, stopping at the gate, delivered a wooden erection that bore a decided resemblance to a diminutive Noah's Ark on short stilts. Come to an anchorage in their back-yard, the building proved to be the very latest design in movable fowl-houses.

"Really I do think that, after all, Strete is a far more exciting place to live in than London."

Eileen had just finished an exhaustive examination of her new possession when she uttered this astounding statement. Her cheeks were pink with delight, her eyes sparkling. She had discovered that the new hen-house, in addition to all the latest improvements such as top ventilation, raised floor, movable perches, glass window, and outside nest-boxes with hinged flap, possessed an absurdly tricky little ladder for the hens to walk up when they went to bed, or to mount on the more important occasions when they experienced a desire to lay.

Strete more exciting than London! At the

rank heresy Belle's eyes opened wide. "Why! Eileen, nothing ever happens here!" she said.

"Things that really matter *do* happen," asserted Eileen. "And there are constantly fresh things to do. In London we always seemed to keep doing the same sort of thing over and over again, and it got so tiresome. Now to-day there will be the hens to install in their new house. Mrs. Brown-Jones can go with them, the ducklings are getting too big for her now. And after I have white-washed the old hen-house the young ducks can set up a bachelor establishment there."

"Eileen, I believe you regard the prospect of whitewashing that ghastly old meat-safe as a treat," cried Belle; and Eileen knew that she could not truthfully contradict her.

Matters had moved a little slowly with Miss Fleming since that spring evening when, tempest-tossed and weary, she had taken refuge in the Battlements. From that time she had not seen the Misses Moate. Eileen's indignation at the mean usage her precious sister had been subjected to was so great, that she felt her only way to avoid giving it open expression was to avoid meeting the perpetrators.

Belle, though she had been the actual sufferer by

the prim spinsters' worship of stereotyped routine, harboured no feeling of acute enmity. Perhaps she secretly realised that, but for their frigid adherence to form, she would not have had Felix Gundry's sympathy, would never have set foot across the sacred precincts of the Battlements, or have seen its owner in the enlightening character of host.

With a woman of romantic temperament, such as Belle, a suggestion of sentiment is the spice of life. For a time she cherished vague hopes that their unforeseen encounter might result in an increase of friendliness. But much to Belle's regret, and a little to her annoyance, her only meetings with Gundry were the casual encounters of the byways.

She did not guess that Gundry was schooling himself against her. Early experience had rendered him distrustful of womankind; and, his opinion of the sex not modified by the insight gained from his professional experience, he had resolved to set Belle Fleming out of his thoughts; or rather had determinedly refused to permit her to enter them.

That blustery evening when she rested by his lonely hearth, a hearth more lonely than ever since

his dog was killed, he had all unwittingly felt something of the charm imparted by a womanly presence. In her pretty evening dress,—whose diaphanous material showed a hint of white neck and arms,—her pale golden hair glinting against the dark leather of the chair, he could not refrain from feeling a reluctant admiration. Though his quick eyes, at their first interview, had noted that the colour of her hair did not "go" with her dark eyes and eyebrows.

Suspecting nothing of his attitude towards herself, the chance of a meeting with the Doctor gave Belle an unconfessed object in the walks that she now took daily. The exercise had the beneficial effect of freshening her complexion, brightening her eyes, and of adding so charming a curve to her always graceful figure, that Gundry, when he passed her walking lightly along, a tall ebony cane—a relic of the late Sir James,—conformed to feminine uses through Belle's invincible adaptability by the addition of a knot of ribbon—in one hand, and usually a sheaf of wild blossoms in the other, sometimes found it extremely difficult to pass her with merely a casual greeting.

In direct opposition to his preconceived notion, Belle made no allusion to the property she had left

by his fireside: the simple reason for her silence being that she was under the impression that the slipper-bag must have been dropped in the road before he met her. And, aware that any perishable article that had lain at the mercy of the elements through that night of sleet and storm would scarcely be worth recovery, she had not given the matter a second thought.

In truth Belle Fleming had little time for repining. The narrowed conditions of their life at Strete Tything afforded ample scope to her natural gift for contrivance. Women love petty economies. Many a matron who has been wretched and discontented in affluence, when suddenly plunged into a poverty that renders pinching and scraping a necessity becomes happy and satisfied. To Belle Fleming the housekeeping of Lavender Lea, which, on undertaking the heavier portion of the outdoor work, Eileen surrendered entirely to her sister, became something in the nature of an engrossing game. She prided herself in the contrivance of dainty dishes at the smallest possible cost. Each week a certain modest sum was set apart for household expenses. A careful record of outlay was kept, and every sixpence saved was accounted a matter of congratulation.

The garden and the fowls—her department of the housekeeping—Eileen declared must be self-supporting. So every pound of peas or spinach, each dozen of eggs, each quart of gooseberries, was solemnly sold by her to Belle at market-prices and as punctiliously paid for out of the housekeeping allowance.

It was surprising how speedily the hens paid not only for themselves and for the grain that supplemented their diet of house-scraps, but also for the enclosure of wire-netting rendered imperative by their roving propensities. Eileen's sneaking desire to purchase a black pigling that might be reared on the vegetable refuse Belle wisely quashed.

As for the garden, Eileen insisted on making it repay all the money that, in their inexperience, they had disbursed to the rapacious Deeble, before reckoning anything as gain. That accomplished, she declared the result would be nearly all profit. Meanwhile the garden supplied the small family with an abundance of wholesome food. From the old strawberry-beds that the devastating hand of Deeble had itched to uproot, she had picked every day for fully a month sufficient of the small sweet berries to serve for dessert. In the height of the

strawberry season there had even been enough surplus berries to make a few pots of jam.

"I do believe my stupid blunder about the bulbs was directly prompted by Providence," Eileen declared, as she and Belle ate their strawberries and cream; "for if I hadn't got shirty when the old wretch laughed at me, he might still have been waxing fat upon our substance. And we would have lost the keen gratification we had yesterday of sending John Hornecke that twenty pounds."

Matters were proceeding thus placidly when near the close of July, Mrs. Hornecke wrote announcing that John and she had arranged to pass August at the Cliff Hotel at Clystmouth, a rising watering-place a dozen miles south from Strete Tything.

As she read this unexpected item of news aloud at the breakfast-table, Belle revealed decided annoyance.

"I wonder what on earth is bringing the Horneckes here. Why can't Aunt Hornecke go to her beloved Folkestone as usual? and leave us our own little bit of the world? Oh, I see! She says *John* wishes to come to Devon. I suppose he means to keep a watchful eye over us to see that we don't launch out into any fresh extravagances," she was saying crossly, when a glance at Eileen's

conscious face enlightened her as to her sister's feelings in the matter and brought her conjectures to an abrupt conclusion. Belle's subsequent remarks regarding the Horneckes were tinctured with mercy, and she it was who suggested inviting their friends to drive up and spend a day at Lavender Lea very soon after their arrival at Clystmouth.

At first the visit promised to pass off to the entire satisfaction of everyone. Outspoken Mrs. Hornecke's frank astonishment at the difference wrought in the appearance of the cottage since the era of worthy Miss Dumbleton of commonplace mind went far to conciliate Belle, to whom the credit rightly belonged.

In common with most other large-framed and large-hearted women who all their lives have been accustomed to large houses, Mrs. Hornecke loved a cottage. She exclaimed with delight at the daintiness of the sweet-scented violet and green drawing-room, and refused to rest until she had seen all over the transformed dwelling; even rustling her silk-lined skirt over the flagged floor of the scullery, and down the narrow brick steps leading to the underground cellar. Though probably quite as interested, her step-son was less vociferously enthusiastic.

Luncheon proved a triumph, both for the mistresses of Lavender Lea and for the resources of the miniature establishment. Though necessarily simple, the menu had been choice. The salmon Belle had made a special journey to Parkeval to fetch had been expensive; but, served with abundance of crisp white lettuce-hearts and tender young beet from the garden, and plenty of mayonnaise sauce, a small piece made quite an imposing dish. Then followed a pair of Eileen's plumpest ducklings resting in a bed of the very peas the question of whose staking had caused Eileen so much disquietude of mind. The potatoes were those Ashleaf kidneys that Deeble had just finished setting when Eileen, acting the part of the Angel with the flaming sword, drove him forth from the garden. The greengage plums that filled the fruit pie came from the tree that spread its laden branches along the warmth of the southern wall. As Belle was able proudly to state—"Except for the salmon—oh, and the cream, of course,—the luncheon is entirely home-grown."

When they strolled in the garden in the afternoon, a trifling occurrence served to ruffle the serenity of two of the company.

Hornecke feeling his apple-tree a special bond

of interest between Eileen and himself, proposed visiting it. To his surprise Eileen, without giving any better reason than that the fruit was not yet ripe, seemed determined to stroll anywhere except to the further end of the walk where it stood.

She took him hither and thither to inspect one thing after another, but the one item in which he was really interested she seemed determined to avoid. Thinking the matter over, as he walked moodily up and down smoking, while she was indoors superintending the preparation of tea, Hornecke arrived at the sordid, but quite natural conclusion, that the apples on his special tree, being of an early dessert kind, had in all probability been eaten.

The little matter annoyed him curiously. Men are more sentimental than women. Eileen's spontaneously pledging her word that the tree would be reserved for him had gratified him greatly. Now the notion that she had already forgotten what to him was a treasured memory cast a shadow over the remainder of his day.

The sunny hours sped. At four o'clock they had tea on the flower-girt square of closely-shorn turf that Belle dignified by the misnomer of lawn. The others might have preferred to drink their tea

in the seclusion of the walled back-garden, where Eileen could have watched her plants growing, and listened to the 'Quack-quack!' of her bereaved ducklings as they waddled ungracefully about amid the greenery. Unfortunately Belle would have accounted it a waste of good material to conceal their handsome silver and pretty china from the gaze of such of the Strete Tything public as chose to pierce the lilac hedge separating the lawn from the high-road.

Tea over, the Cliff Hotel landau—a diametrically different vehicle from the vault on wheels belonging to the Setting Sun at Pennyland—appeared to convey the visitors back to Clystmouth.

When it had drawn up outside the green gate, Mrs. Hornecke discovered that she had left her feather boa in the kitchen-garden, and sent her step-son to fetch it. As he did not return, Eileen—following to assist in the search—found him standing before his apple-tree, the object of his quest completely forgotten. His back was towards her, he did not hear her approach.

"John, Aunt Hornecke is getting impatient, and I've found the boa," she said, half-timidly as though discovered in a fault.

Turning round sharply, John looked at her, his

expression an odd mixture of reproach and apology.

"So *this* is what you have been up to." He indicated certain of the larger apples, on whose sun-kissed sides the initials J. H., cut in paper, had been pasted.

"Oh, John! I meant it for a surprise. I cut the letters out of postage-stamp borders and stuck them on. I did not intend you to see them until your birthday—it is in September, isn't it?—And by that time, when the paper was washed off, the initials would have shown quite plainly." Avoiding his gaze, Eileen was making hurried, scarce coherent vindication. "See, even now——" scraping away the paper, she showed a J.H. faintly traced in yellow-green on the reddening surface of the apple.

For a moment Hornecke regarded her silently.

"So this was the reason you were willing to walk everywhere in the garden except in this direction?"

An unwonted quality in his tone induced in Eileen a sudden accession of shyness. With a murmured remark regarding the waiting carriage, she turned and hastened off to rejoin the others, affording him no opportunity of continuing the conversation.

Farewells had been said, and the promise of a return visit to the hotel given. Mrs. Hornecke, with the satisfactory feeling that she had spent a pleasant day, and had quite exhausted the resources of both Lavender Lea and its surroundings, was stepping into the carriage when her foot slipped; and she fell, striking her knee on the step.

The injury thus simply incurred threatened to be serious. From the first moment there was no question of continuing the journey. With the assistance of the coachman, Hornecke carried his step-mother into the drawing-room, and laid her on the couch. Then entering the carriage he drove off in haste to fetch the doctor.

It hardly required a qualified medical opinion to reveal the fact that the hurt was somewhat grave. Mrs. Hornecke was faint with pain. The usually florid colour on her cheeks had faded to red streaks on a pallid ground. She looked old and worn. While Eileen and Cecilia prepared the spare bedroom for occupation, Belle sat by and fanned her.

Almost before they expected him, Dr. Gundry arrived. He had chanced to be at home, and without the loss of a moment had accompanied John Hornecke to Lavender Lea. A careful ex-

amination convinced him that the injury was one that it would require both time and patience to heal. The return to Clystmouth, he declared without hesitation, was out of the question for at least a fortnight.

"When a doctor tells a patient straight off that she must expect to be laid up for a fortnight, he is certain to mean a month," whispered Belle. Mrs. Hornecke had been settled for the night, and Belle, who had arranged to sleep on a couch beside her, was in Eileen's room putting her hair to bed. "We must make up our minds to have an invalid on our hands all the remainder of the summer. I know it's ungrateful to grumble, but I was beginning to enjoy the place so much!" Eileen made no reply, and Belle, who had finished plaiting her hair into a long queue, paused in the act of slipping her arms into a kimono to ask—

"Have you and John Hornecke quarrelled? I thought you were good friends now?"

"I thought so too," confessed Eileen. "He was so kind, and they came to Devon, and—and all that. But this afternoon he suddenly became so distant and stiff. It is all right now, I think; he was quite nice after tea, but I do dislike changeable people. They make life so—difficult."

"Most men are changeable. At least that has been my experience," said Belle, with a sigh at the perfidy of mankind. But as she lay down on her improvised couch, Belle felt happier than a compassionate female in attendance on a suffering relative has any right to be. For she had seen Felix Gundry; and though he had taken little notice of her further than to instruct her regarding the treatment required, there was an element of pleasant anticipation in the prospect of seeing him frequently during Mrs. Hornecke's stay under their roof.

## CHAPTER XXII

### The Man Who Loved

THE following morning found the little household early astir. The invalid had passed a restless night, and Belle when she received Dr. Gundry was pale and heavy-eyed.

He had taken so little notice of her—listening to her report with scarcely a word of comment—that it was a surprise to Belle, when she accompanied him to the door, to find him pause abruptly in the hall to say:

"You had a disturbed night. Better lie down all afternoon. Your sister can take your place."

Gundry's manner was far from suave. Quite opposite, indeed, to the kindly sympathy that characterised his treatment of the patient. Yet Belle felt greatly comforted by the evidence of his thought for her welfare expressed in the laconic command, though she did not know that his brusqueness with her proceeded from a stern determination not to permit himself to treat her with

anything beyond ordinary civility,—a resolve which, as he was a poor actor, led him into adopting towards her a stiffness of attitude that was an excellent imitation of rudeness. Every woman enjoys being domineered over by a man she respects, and the few curt words were balm to her hungry heart.

Upstairs, among the pretty muslins of the low-ceilinged bedroom, poor Mrs. Hornecke lay groaning a little with pain, and scolding a good deal from irritation at fate, her own stupidity in general, and the step of the hotel carriage in particular. To have the mishap occur before they had been three days at the hotel, where their rooms had been secured for the whole of August, seemed to Mrs. Hornecke the most grievous part of the matter.

"If it had even been the last week of our stay, I wouldn't have minded so much. But to think of this happening almost before we had time to settle down, and when we had secured such specially nice rooms, too, does make me cross," mourned the good lady; who, though she never objected to paying a good price for what she got, had a very reasonable disinclination to disbursing solid coin for that which she had no prospect of enjoying.

The presence of an invalid upsetting all household arrangements, and Belle's time being fully

occupied up-stairs, Mrs. Campkins, who, in younger and presumably more slender days, had been a cook, was engaged to come for several hours daily to assist her daughter, and enable Eileen to devote a little time to the garden.

Early in the day the Cliff Hotel victoria again appeared conveying John Hornecke and his step-mother's belongings, which, by some process known only to himself, he had succeeded in cramming into her travelling trunk, bonnet-box and dressing-bag. Luckily for the patient's peace of mind Belle contrived to conceal from her the creased gowns and crushed bonnets until the effect of her step-son's summary treatment was no longer noticeable.

Being desirous not to add to the cares of the little establishment, Hornecke tarried only to share their luncheon before returning to Clystmouth. Next afternoon he rode up to inquire, and was easily persuaded to remain till nightfall. Thereafter his daily visits to Lavender Lea began to absorb so large a proportion of the working hours, that Mrs. Hornecke, half jestingly remarked that it would save him a lot of trouble were he to take up his abode in the village. With alacrity John seized upon the suggestion, and induced the landlady of the Ploughboy Tavern to let him put up under her

roof. But, though his headquarters were presumably at the Ploughboy, the landlady's labour on his behalf rapidly became more and more of a sinecure. Very soon he ceased to trouble the Tavern, except for bed and breakfast.

Almost at once a mutual liking had sprung up between Hornecke and Dr. Gundry. A house that is regulated by the requirements of an invalid of necessity keeps early hours. Soon it became an understood matter that when Hornecke had bid the inmates of the cottage "Good-night," he would stroll to the Battlements to smoke and play billiards with its owner.

Although in appearance and manner the two men were diametrically opposed, yet in integrity, dislike of conventionality, and abhorrence of shams were they closely allied. Deliberate of speech, generous and kindly by nature, John Hornecke was big, broad-shouldered, wore a close-cropped beard, and blinked a little with short-sighted blue eyes. Gundry, though nearly as tall, was slender, cleanshaven, plain-featured, with alert eyes beneath strongly-marked eye-brows—one who gave little outward impression of endurance, yet a man of iron nerve, tireless muscles, and quick wit.

"I always knew John Hornecke was an ideal

step-son," said Belle, one idyllic August evening when, the invalid having been tucked away to rest, her nurse was free to stroll round the moonlit garden. "But never till now did I guess how absolutely devoted he was. Let me see—he came here immediately after breakfast this morning. . ."

"You know he was anxious to hear what the doctor said," interposed Eileen hastily.

"Yes, yes, of course, of course; *quite* natural," agreed Belle in the same mock-serious tone. "Arrived at ten a. m. Waited to luncheon——"

"You forget he walked to Pennyland to try to get some ice."

"—Had tea with us. Stayed to dinner," went on Belle, taking no notice of the interruption.

"You know he was helping me to finish the hen-coop I had made such a mess of."

"—Remained to dine, and left—wasn't it he I heard leaving as I came out? It is nine o'clock now, and he only left because he had promised to go to the Battlements to play billiards. I trust a visit of eleven hours' duration enabled Mr. Hornecke to assure himself that the physician's report on his step-mother's case had been favourable?"

But Eileen, jerking her arm from her sister's detaining grasp, had strolled off alone to where the

tobacco-plants perfumed the night air. And Belle, after taking the whole moonlit world into her confidence with a beatific smile, passed indoors.

By the end of a fortnight Mrs. Hornecke was able to be moved to a bed put up for her in the drawing-room; and a week later a wheeled chair was procured by means of which she could get out to the lawn without the exertion of ascending or descending stairs.

Matters had so far progressed when one morning, to everybody's surprise, John Hornecke did not put in an appearance. Their surprise was rapidly changing to anxiety when the absentee appeared, driving a phaeton.

The ladies, Mrs. Hornecke in her wheeled chair, were having tea on the little lawn, surrounded by Belle's violas and heliotrope, when he arrived, wearing the shamefaced expression peculiar to a modest man who is forced publicly to acknowledge a thoughtful action. So reluctant was he to refer to his purchase that it was some days before the household realised that he had actually *bought* the equipage, not merely hired it for his stepmother's use. And it was not until their guests were on the point of departure that the Flemings understood that the phaeton and the sleek brown pony

were destined to become their property when the invalid's temporary need for them was at an end.

Next morning it was a fresh surprise to Eileen, as she glanced into the stable on her return from the garden where she had been gathering a bunch of fresh parsley for the garnishing of the breakfast ham, to find that a young lad in leggings was grooming the pony; while sundry bulky packages, that even the least accustomed eye would have recognised as fodder, littered the yard.

Eileen, astonished at this prompt solution to the problem regarding the feeding and care of this important addition to their live-stock that had secretly been worrying her, had retired to an upturned box in the miniature coach-house, where she was engaged plucking a duck hastily sacrificed the day before, when John Hornecke, entering the little stable-yard by the back entrance, discovered her.

"Oh, John, I wanted so much to see you. A lad has come," she began anxiously.

"I know. I sent him. Rucker, his name is. He is to live out, so he won't be any trouble. And he will look after the pony and feed the hens and work in the garden."

"But, John, that is *my* work. *I* feed the hens. *I* attend to the garden," she expostulated half laugh-

ing, half vexed at finding her newly-found kingdom in danger of being taken from her.

The sunshine glinting through the open doorway cast flickering lights over her blue cotton gown and on the buff-hued feathers lying about her feet. The soft southern breeze stirred the hair upon her forehead.

Did maidens only guess how infinitely more attractive they appear to the masculine mind when engaged in any household task than when prinked out for company, they would one and all forswear society. In her faded blue cotton gown with her dark hair in a plait down her back, Eileen impressed Hornecke as looking far sweeter and more winsome than she had ever done in her smartest town garb.

As for Eileen, she thought Hornecke quiet, and was inclined to regret her deshabille. She did not know that, the while he stood silent, as though he had not heard her reproach, his mind was busying itself with a fluff of vagrant yellow down that rested lightly upon the dark rings of hair clustering about her brow. Or that he was wondering what she would think if he made so bold as to remove it, an unfulfilled ambition that made him tingle all over with boyish diffidence and daring.

"But, John—Didn't you hear what I said? The garden is my special work. And the hens. *I* attend to them both."

For another silent moment Hornecke looked at her, an expression that was new in his eyes. When he answered, it was with the greater daring of a man who is customarily backward with women.

"You have more important work to attend to. You have got to attend to *me!*"

He did not trouble to explain his enigmatic remark. Perhaps Eileen needed no solution. It was with rose-flushed cheeks and a fast-beating heart that she resumed her plucking.

The weather throughout the earlier portion of August had been dull and showery. During the later days of the month the sun again shone steadfastly; and, with Dr. Gundry's permission, Mrs. Hornecke was able each afternoon to drive up to the nearest segment of moorland to take tea in the open air.

Their chosen place was a wide heather-studded slope stretching towards the sunset. Along its eastern boundary ran a line of fragrant pines. In front of the pines was a high belt of furze garlanded by a luxuriant tangle of blackberries.

Belle, in her now-resumed character of house-

keeper, had declared her willingness to make use of all the wild fruit the others could gather. She resolutely refused to pick the berries herself, declaring all the brambles in Christendom insufficient recompense for the wear and tear of skin and garment accruing from the necessary tussle with the thorny branches.

So during these radiant afternoons John and Eileen filled a tin can with the ripe fruit, while Mrs. Hornecke dozed comfortably amid the cushions of the phaeton, her injured limb propped up on the opposite seat; and Belle, on a campstool set amidst the bee-laden blossoms of the heather, read a novel in the intervals of superintending the boiling of the kettle over the spirit-fuel and setting out the tea-things.

The John Hornecke who dyed his finger-tips with the purple juice of the blackberries and ruined his summer suits by contact with their prickly stems, was a different man from the grave adjuster of averages known in City circles.

There was something of that idea in Eileen's mind as, observing him earnestly across a tangle of down-drooping red and black berries, she caught his eye, and catching it smiled confusedly.

"What were you thinking just now?"

Eileen's colour deepened.

"What were *you* thinking?" she made feeble retort.

"I was wondering what good fairy had spirited away the fashionable lady I knew in London and brought back the little girl of long ago in her place."

"How funny!"

Eileen's dimple was in evidence. Her blue eyes were dancing with amusement.

"What is funny?"

"Funny you should think that, when I was just wondering why I used to believe you to be a severe captious sort of person. Then I hadn't seen you with a pipe and a panama hat and scratched hands getting torn to pieces in a bramble patch!"

There was a subtle enchantment in the vivid autumn air; witchery in the mingled odours of pine, heather and gorse. Gorse a month ago so void of blossom, now radiant in renewed golden glory.

Ardent words reached to John Hornecke's lips and, met by the barrier of a life-long reserve, there halted. And before the momentary hesitation had passed there came from the farther side of the patch of honey-scented heath the cheerful "chink-chink" of a tea-spoon smartly tapped against the side of a

cup, and the sound of Belle's voice summoning them to tea.

Tea was over. The enamelled dishes, the tea-kettle, spirit-lamp, all the multifarious items of a modern tea-basket, had been stowed away within its circumscribed limits. The pony-carriage, Belle driving, had set off on the homeward journey; John and Eileen following on foot.

The way led down hill towards the west. And as they walked, the glorious panorama of the sun setting over the far purple distances of Dartmoor lay before them.

It was with the unspoken knowledge that the words that trembled on the verge of utterance might change the whole current of their lives—with the innate certainty that no speech exchanged between them could possibly be commonplace—that Hornecke and Eileen began their walk.

The chance was one in a thousand. A two-mile walk with no likelihood of interruption was one to be eagerly seized upon. A few days later Mrs. Hornecke would leave Strete Tything, and John would be back in the city. But though Hornecke was miserably conscious of letting the precious moments slip past, the words that, while they were

in company with the others, had clamoured at the doors of silence for utterance, halted. Hornecke, tongue-tied, painfully aware of his own seemingly ungracious taciturnity, walked silently onwards, mad at himself for not gripping the opportunity, yet lacking the words necessary.

Eileen, a spray of heather tucked in the waistbelt of her white serge frock, trotted with content beside her guardian. With quick intuition she guessed something of the cause of his silence; although, even in the most secret recesses of her heart, she did not give her sacred thought the crudity of words.

It was Eileen who broke the silence. Womanlike she sought to give the conversation an impersonal touch.

"You remember Major Bryson? Do you ever see him now?"

"I saw him some time in summer. Looked ill, I thought. Older, too." Then after a pause: "He was a great friend of yours, wasn't he? Do you never hear from him?"

"We had a formal card at Christmas. Nothing more. Do you know"—the hour and circumstance lent itself to confidence,—"I think Belle worried about him a little when we came here first."

A new light broke upon Hornecke.

"Belle—do you think he thought of her seriously?"

"Oh yes! He used to pay her a lot of attention. And one day—it was just before the sky fell—I was certain he was on the verge of proposing. And if he had, I think Belle would have been willing. She moped a little after we first came to Devon. In spring she spoke of making a 'Friendship's Garden,' and I could tell she meant to grow in it the different kinds of flowers he had sent her. But when she found it was too late to plant the Madonna lilies, and that smilax wouldn't grow out of doors, she gave up the idea.

"Did Major Bryson send your sister flowers?"

"Yes. You remember an evening party we had last July? Well, that day he sent her piles of the loveliest flowers. I never believed he cared for anybody but himself till then. But the flowers opened my eyes. No man not in love would have been so lavish!"

"But *did* Bryson send those flowers?"

Something in Hornecke's tone made Eileen glance sharply at him.

"Yes . . . at least, we both thought . . . Did he not?"

"Well, I was under the impression *I* had sent those flowers." Hornecke's words came without hesitation now. "And I did not mean them for Belle. So, you see, Eileen, *I* must have been the man who was in love!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### Mrs. Chalfont Returns

NEEDLESS to say, the only people taken by surprise by John and Eileen's engagement were the contracting parties themselves. Mrs. Hornecke declared she had always suspected her step-son of having a "leaning" in the direction of his younger ward, and that she would be delighted to get somebody to share the labour of looking after him. And Belle, though in one way she rejoiced in her sister's happiness, shed many secret tears at the thought of the inevitable separation.

John and Eileen having wisely resolved not to lay desolate two homes by the common process of setting up a third, had decided to share the big house in Winton Square with Mrs. Hornecke; and to keep on Lavender Lea as a rural home to which they could often escape from town. Belle, by her own desire, was to make her headquarters at Lavender Lea, paying frequent visits to town. Cecilia

was to remain in her service, the boy being retained to look after the garden and pony.

There were various reasons why the engagement should be a short one. Mrs. Hornecke, now fully recovered, was anxious to hurry on the wedding, that she might be free to fulfil a long promise of spending a winter with relatives in Montreal. John was of opinion that, having let so many precious years slip past before finding out their own minds, Eileen and he could not afford to lose any more time. As for Belle, she thought that if the wrench had to come, the sooner it was over the better. Though it was with feelings approaching dismay that she faced the loneliness that lay before her.

As it was, the prospect of the marriage gave almost unmixed satisfaction. For years the families had known each other intimately, as the world accounts intimacy; still it had required the close association of the recently past weeks to reveal their real selves to each other. To open the Hornecke's eyes to the value of the Flemings' genius for making much of very little; their adaptability to changed conditions of life; their cleverness and capacity in domestic matters; Eileen's sweetness of disposition, and Belle's gentle skill in nursing.

Womanlike, as soon as Mrs. Hornecke's pain had

ceased to absorb her attention to the exclusion of all else, she began to concern herself with the inexplicable fact of Belle's seemingly confirmed celibacy. Why a girl of such undeniable personal attractions should, at the mature age of thirty, still be unwed, the good lady failed to understand.

The worst of coming to live in such a dead-alive place, as she told her step-son confidentially, was that there did not even seem to be anybody sniffing round!

Casting about in her mind for a likely suitor, Mrs. Hornecke's selection fell upon the only probable person—Felix Gundry.

With the over anxiety shown in such matters by her sex, who foolishly doubt the capacity of mankind for managing its own affairs of the heart, she sought to help on matters by craving the Doctor's attendance even after he had declared her beyond the stage of benefiting by his daily visits. But Gundry frustrated her secret intention by informing her plainly that she no longer required his advice.

Later, when the Horneckes had returned to Clystmouth for a breath of sea-air before going back to London, they invited the Flemings and Dr. Gundry to stay from Saturday till Monday at the Cliff Hotel as their guests. The girls went, but, somewhat to

the wily dame's disgust, Gundry refused the invitation on the plea of having a patient he could not leave.

"To get Felix Gundry to regard one with interest, one would really require to develop some loathly disease," Belle declared petulantly one wet afternoon, as she turned from the drawing-room window after watching his smart red-wheeled dog-cart flash by; the owner, for all the notice he took, being evidently unaware that Lavender Lea or its occupants existed. "He seems to have no use for ordinary wholesome beings. Perhaps, now that his aunt has returned, he may be induced to come out of his shell a little."

Truly the long-anticipated return of Mrs. Chalfont had galvanised Strete Tything into something approaching animation. The Uplands Court carriages with their high-stepping horses and showy liveries seemed always passing through the village. Though it must be confessed that the expectant strangers found the first sight of their loudly belauded owner disappointing.

Mrs. Chalfont was short, shapeless and, despite a superabundance of costly raiment, dowdy. She could boast no high lineage. Still, by dint of a heavy purse, a complaisant personality, and the ab-

sence of any rival patroness, the owner of Uplands Court reigned supreme in Strete Tything. To watch her drive through the village, bowing graciously to right and left, in suave acceptance of the obeisance of the gratified villagers, was to witness a royal progress in miniature.

There had been rumours of a big house party at Uplands Court: rumours that arose with each shooting-season, to die away without any visible confirmation. For, as those who had experience of Mrs. Chalfont's decorous house-parties were unanimous in the opinion that they represented the epitome of boredom, guests were wary of acceptance. Except when her nephew brought some guns to shoot over the covers, or the local Hunt accepted her invitation to meet and breakfast at the Court, Mrs. Chalfont's hospitality was confined to the large annual entertainment to which she invited members of the county families who were within easy driving distance, and such of the Strete Tything folks as did not benefit by her direct charity.

In the meantime Mrs. Chalfont occupied the big Georgian house with no companionship except that of her hired friend and confidante, the Honourable Arabella Rodd, fourth unmarried daughter of a penniless Irish peer. In appearance Miss Rodd was

thin, drab-haired, weak-eyed, soft and purring in manner. Her secret desire was towards Felix Gundry, who—as his aunt's heir—she assumed would be a suitable spouse even for an (impoverished) baron's daughter—an opinion which unfortunately Dr. Gundry did not share.

Miss Rodd's leading characteristic was an overweening curiosity. In that particular she suited her hostess admirably, for Mrs. Chalfont, who had no secrets of her own to conceal, owned the faculty of enjoying those that were the property of others. And in ferreting out these, Arabella revealed a cleverness that at times almost approached genius.

Most of us are lamentably lacking in that concern regarding other people's affairs that formed the essence of Miss Rodd's existence. The idea of anything hidden aroused in her a burning curiosity. In a library she would pass by shelves filled with a choice selection of the newest or the rarest works to rummage amongst those less reputable books that experience had taught her to look for behind the estimable volumes that were not ashamed boldly to confront the public eye. One of her first proceedings on taking possession of a new room was to lift out all the empty drawers in the not infrequently ful-

filled hope that a letter belonging to some previous occupier might inadvertently have been caught between the back of the drawer and the frame.

Perhaps Belle Fleming, who had seen the Uplands Court carriage driving past, resented the prospect of Felix Gundry being subjected to the temptation accruing from the superior attractions of his aunt's solitary guest. For she unburdened her mind in caustic and ill-advised remarks regarding the young lady's crude taste in dress.

"Imagine anyone with a complexion like hers not knowing better than to wear that shade of green. Besides, it's as old as the hills. I wore it four years ago!" Remarks showing clearly that though Miss Fleming affected to despise Miss Rodd, she had mentally raised her to the level of a probable rival.

Eileen's wedding was arranged to take place on the last day of October, from the Horneckes' house in London. The previous weeks, while engaged in the all-important labour of selecting the trousseau, the sisters were to pass in Winton Square. Eileen was already busy with the more dainty portion of her lingerie, stitching thereinto many happy dreams for the future.

One afternoon about the middle of September,

Belle was on her way to Probit's farm to inquire into the non-arrival of their bi-weekly portion of fresh butter, when she encountered Mrs. Hewson trotting briskly along, a huge vegetable-marrow clasped in her arms.

"Mrs. Probit would insist upon giving me this marrow, Miss Fleming. Really, I don't know why people *will* load me with gifts! But since I was a girl it has always been the same—I never can admire anything, without people simply forcing it on me. And it is so difficult to refuse without seeming rude. Isn't it, Miss Fleming?"

Mrs. Hewson had so insistent a fashion of repeating the name of the person with whom she was conversing, that Belle was wont to declare that, in the previous generation, circumstances had obliged her family to say "sir" and "ma'am," and that now Mrs. Hewson, feeling herself in better circumstances, made a point of flaunting on every possible occasion what she supposed to be the evidence of social equality.

"So dear Mrs. Chalfont has returned at last, Miss Fleming," she went on. "Doesn't it make a difference in Strete? Really, as I said to her when I met her coming out of the school yesterday, her presence is like sunshine in the village! Have you

seen her, Miss Fleming? Don't you think she has a most aristocratic appearance?"

"Well, I have merely seen her driving past, but I hardly think aristocratic is the word I would apply."

"No, Miss Fleming? Oh, perhaps you think distinguished or patrician would be better. For myself, I always think of the beauty of holiness when I see her. She is so charitable, so rich in good works. Oh, of course you are going to the Theatrical Entertainment at Uplands Court on the 28th?"

"No. I don't know Mrs. Chalfont."

"Oh, dear, dear! What a pity! You would have enjoyed it, Miss Fleming. What a pity you are not asked."

"Who is the young lady I saw driving with Mrs. Chalfont yesterday?"

"A tall slender girl? Oh, that is the Honourable Arabella Rodd. She stays a great deal with Mrs. Chalfont. Her father is a Lord—an Irish Lord. Not wealthy, perhaps, but very——"

"Aristocratic?" interjected Belle.

"Oh, *most* aristocratic, Miss Fleming. They say Dr. Gundry is likely to marry the Honourable Miss Rodd. It would be extremely suitable for both. He would gain the advantage of noble birth, she

of money—what both want, as you might say, Miss Fleming."

"Why, Miss Fleming, here *is* Dr. Gundry!" she exclaimed, as a horseman appeared in sight. "I do wonder who he has been visiting. I didn't know anyone was ill up this way. And he is so close about his patients, it's no use trying to find out," she whispered, as, nearing the ladies, Gundry pulled up his horse.

"Dr. Gundry, I was so sorry to miss your visit last evening. Edgar told me you did not think him any worse. I was certain of it. I always tell him he's far too nervous about himself."

"Your husband is very ill, *very seriously* ill." Dr. Gundry spoke decisively. "He requires all the care and attention you can possibly give him."

At the words, that although quiet were intentionally emphatic, words that even her dense mind could not refuse to see held an implied reproach, Mrs. Hewson bridled a little.

"I'm sure nobody could possibly be more devoted than I am, Doctor. Only, as I often tell Edgar, if I stayed moping indoors as he does, I'd be ill too. Besides, I have to go out to get little delicacies for him." She indicated the giant marrow as proof of her wifely solicitude.

"So dear Mrs. Chalfont has returned to Uplands Court? How rejoiced you must be to have her in the neighbourhood again. And I see the Honourable Miss Rodd is with her still, Doctor?" Mrs. Hewson's attempt at an arch smile was a dismal failure. "I was just telling Miss Fleming how much I was looking forward to the Entertainment at the Court on the 28th. Dear Mrs. Chalfont's parties are always unique. Always some surprise. Theatricals this time, I hear?"

Gundry had listened to this ebullition in silence. At its close he turned to Belle, who stood a little apart, unwilling that he should class her as an intimate of the voluble gad-about, Mrs. Hewson; yet reluctant to appear rude by walking on.

"Have you and Miss Eileen received an invitation for the 28th?"

Belle shook her head.

"You forget we have not the pleasure of Mrs. Chalfont's acquaintance."

Felix Gundry was ever a man of few words, He made no rash promise. Yet as he rode away Belle felt assured that he would see that were Eileen or she absent from the gathering, it would be from choice, not necessity.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### Slippers with Red Heels

HAD Miss Fleming known with what antagonistic feelings one inmate of Uplands Court looked upon her, she might not have regarded admission within its walls as a thing so greatly to be desired.

At the very moment that Gundry was registering a mental resolve to induce his aunt to invite the Flemings to her approaching festivity, Mrs. Chalfont and her companion had called at his house, and were awaiting his return thither.

The visitors had been shown into the state drawing-room. But the Honourable Arabella was so concerned lest the chilly air of the unused apartment might induce a return of Mrs. Chalfont's rheumatism, that she persuaded that lady into ringing the bell and requesting to be removed to a room with a fire. Thus early in the autumn the only room that boasted a fire was the Doctor's sanctum, and into these sacred precincts—as Miss Rodd had doubtless anticipated—they were solemnly escorted.

Sinking into the big arm-chair by the fire, Mrs.

Chalfont rested her podgy feet on the fender, and, as was her wont of an afternoon, slipped placidly into the realms of unconsciousness, leaving her friend free to prowl about, gleaming as exhaustive a knowledge of the private affairs of her absent host as could be garnered from a cursory perusal of the papers lying on his desk.

Felix Gundry was not the man to permit any secrets entrusted to his care to run the risk of alien scrutiny. The few letters visible were admirably uninteresting. Even the notes on his engagement-tablet were of so laconic a nature as to afford the inquisitive not the slightest satisfaction.

A gentle trial showed the drawers of his desk to be locked; and Arabella was on the point of turning away, disgusted that her unique opportunity of prying should have yielded so barren a result, when the lowest drawer on the left-hand side, tried as a forlorn hope, opened to her touch.

Inside it, resting on packets of neatly docketed letters, she discovered something that amply repaid her search. An embroidered bag and a pair of black satin slippers with high red heels! Surely odd possessions for any man to treasure, but trebly strange of so avowed a woman-hater as Felix Gundry,

The discovery sent the Honourable Arabella tittering and cackling to arouse her confidante, and together the two women discussed the matter with an interest and exhaustiveness worthy a more unique revelation.

"But where did you find the slippers? Surely Felix didn't leave them lying about?" asked Mrs. Chalfont, who still retained some of the elements of honesty.

"Um—They were in the drawer of the writing-table, but the drawer was open. Oh! *wide* open, of course; and as I was passing to get a newspaper, I couldn't help seeing them."

Though Mrs. Chalfont accepted the explanation, her tone expressed uneasiness. Still, she was quite ready to examine the tell-tale foot-gear.

"You shouldn't have taken them out. Felix is always so down on curiosity, that I would hate to have him think we had been prying . . . I do wonder whose slippers they are. I never heard of Felix having a feminine visitor—except patients, of course. And nobody who comes seeking medical advice is likely to carry evening slippers with her."

It fell to Arabella's sharp eyes to discover that the original white kid of the slippers had been

neatly covered with black satin. It was she who guessed that the heels had been coloured red by the same ingenious contriver.

They were still conjecturing, heads close together, when the sound of Gundry's return sent Arabella flying back to the drawer to replace the trophy; leaving Mrs. Chalfont, whose heart was weak, palpitating and fluttered in her chair by the fire.

Finding himself thus unexpectedly confronted with the very person he wished to see, the unconscious Doctor bethought himself of his resolve to get the Flemings included among the guests of the coming entertainment.

"I was just thinking of you, Aunt Lily. I want you to send an invitation for your theatricals to some patients of mine—the Misses Fleming."

"The Misses Fleming?" echoed Mrs. Chalfont, who was still panting a little, as she exchanged a meaning glance with her companion. "How many Misses Fleming are there, Felix? You know we always have such a preponderance of women."

"When it isn't a dance, I don't suppose the proportion of the sexes matters." Gundry had a calm way of over-riding his aunt's scruples. "There are two Misses Fleming, and they live in that

thatched cottage in the village. It used to be old Miss Dumbleton's house."

"Is that a pretty little house where all the flowers in the front garden are lavender, and the name Lavender Lea is painted on the gate?"

Miss Rodd, who probably knew already quite as much about the Flemings as did Gundry, chose to affect ignorance: a procedure that she had often found remarkably successful in the acquirement of information. Unfortunately for her itching ears, Gundry had little to tell; or if he had, preferred to keep it to himself.

During their drive home the ladies metaphorically tore the pretty slippers and their owner to shreds before they arrived at the conclusion that they were the undoubted property of a Fleming; Miss Rodd asserting that the slippers must belong to either of the debatable sisters for various reasons. Firstly—that no other denizen of the village would be so likely to have white kid evening shoes. Secondly—that if she had, she would never have been cunning enough to disguise their original nature so cleverly. Thirdly—that as the Flemings were the first young ladies Mrs. Chalfont could remember her nephew asking her to invite to her house, he must be specially interested in one or other. Fourthly and

lastly (and this was Arabella's own)—that whichever Miss Fleming it was who left her slippers in a bachelor's house, she must be a very undesirable person to know.

Little marvel then that when the formal invitation was despatched to Lavender Lea it did not carry with it Miss Rodd's blessing.

When on the following day there arrived by post at the cottage a card requesting the presence of the Misses Fleming at Uplands Court at 8.30 p.m. on the evening of the twenty-eighth, Eileen demurred.

"Mrs. Chalfont should have called first," she said.

"Oh! Botheration!" cried impatient Belle, whom the prospect of an outing had sent into an exalted state of delight. "You and your silly scruples. Jollifications aren't so plentiful at Strete Tything that we can afford to be so punctilious. I think it most kind of Mrs. Chalfont to invite complete strangers to her house. Besides, with countless arrangements to make, she would have no time for visiting. I'm going to reply at once, accepting for us both."

The intervening days Belle devoted to preparations for the great event. For the time it almost

ranked higher in importance, in her thoughts, than the approaching wedding. Knowing that she looked her best at night, it had always been a source of covert mortification to her that Gundry had never seen her in full evening dress. Now at last he would have an opportunity of seeing how admirably nature had adapted her to fill a position other than that of village spinster.

Eileen regarded the coming festivity at Uplands Court with that indifference wherewith a happy bride views any event that has no actual bearing upon her personal bliss. It was sufficient for Eileen that John would not be present. Assured of that fact, she contemplated the prospect that excited the usually stately Belle into a pleasurable fever of anticipation with a degree of calmness that, had she not been glad for Belle's sake, would have been absolute indifference.

A pink crêpe gown, not absolutely fresh perhaps, for it had seen service during the latter part of her last London season, but still in good condition and new to Devon eyes, Eileen quickly decided would admirably meet the demands of the occasion.

Belle was not so easily satisfied. She turned out all her finery, only to decide after a day spent in trying on and discussing their various demerits,

that, without renovation, none would be worthy the great occasion.

Finally she came to the conclusion that the pale blue satin (it had originally been white; as Belle used to say in confidential moments: "All my evening dresses *begin* by being white—") if veiled with silk chiffon of the palest azure and decorated with an elaborate garniture of silver spangles that already had seen service, would make a smart and becoming gown.

That important point resolved upon, there followed an impatient day passed in waiting for the chiffon for which she had written to London: an angry day when the chiffon on arrival proved to be of the wrong shade; and several frantically busy days when, surrounded by waves of sheeny satin and the desired shade of silky chiffon, Belle sewed as though her life depended upon it.

Excitement seemed to be in the air. In spite of her engrossing labours, Miss Fleming could not avoid hearing rumours of the commotion the coming entertainment was causing in Strete Tything circles. She wondered that Mrs. Chalfont would condescend to invite folks of so little social standing as Mrs. Hewson and others, whose names, she gathered, had been included in the list of invited guests; but

ascribed the action to the good lady's wide charity. Never for a moment did Belle Fleming suppose but that this meeting would prove the prelude to the coming intimacy between Lavender Lea and Uplands Court.

"I'm sure Mrs. Chalfont will be delighted to discover that people like us, who can as it were speak her own language, are living so near. There must be scarcely a person in the neighbourhood she can associate with," she remarked, as she ran the seventh accordion-pleated frill round her train.

But Eileen was so happily engaged with the camisole of lawn, lace and ribbon she was completing, that Belle's Alnaschar-like visions passed unheeded.

## CHAPTER XXV

### Disillusionment

THE great night came at last.

The pony-phaeton not being esteemed a suitable conveyance for an occasion of such social magnitude, the funereal vehicle from the Setting Sun at Pennyland had, early in the previous week, been chartered to call at Lavender Lea at eight o'clock precisely, to transport the ladies to Uplands Court.

Long before the early dusk showed sign of falling, Belle Fleming had begun the serious work of her toilet. Drawing the blinds close, and lighting their tallest lamp and half-a-dozen candles, she began her engrossing labour while Eileen still lingered by the drawing-room fire. And many minutes after Eileen—who had attired herself with the nonchalance displayed by an engaged maiden in dressing for a gathering from which *he* is certain to be absent—was ready to start, Belle was still adding the finishing touches.

Happily the result repaid the pains Belle had

taken, in her desire to make the most of her undoubted physical attractions. The months spent in the pure Devon air had added brilliance to her charms; excitement had lent a sparkle to her eyes, a radiance to her entire personality. So it was with the blissful consciousness that never before had she appeared to better advantage that she at length turned from her mirror.

Cecilia, who acted as lady's-maid, had early been reduced to a state of amazed admiration that rendered her office a sinecure. Even Eileen, when she entered the room and saw Belle stand, her tall slender figure clad in an airy shimmer of blue and silver, her white shoulders and arms bare, a wreath of silver leaves crowning her pale gold hair, could not refrain from uttering an involuntary exclamation of wonder.

"Why, Belle! you look beautiful. Simply beautiful. I don't believe you ever looked so nice in all your life!"

Good Mrs. Campkins, admitted to a private view, was for the moment struck dumb with astonishment. It was the completeness of Belle's appointments that most surprised the worthy dame, who had never owned a quite entire costume, tyrannical momentary restrictions having necessitated her replenishing her

wardrobe by the addition of a single garment at a time.

"An' blue shoes with silver toes! An' as I live, a fan o' the same! Lor, miss, but there's never a lady in the land 'll come up to 'e this night."

The Setting Sun conveyance had been ordered to come at eight, but long before that hour outside noise of both foot and vehicular traffic had shown that something unusual was agog.

Three times Belle had declared their clocks slow; more often she had lamented their stupidity in not ordering the carriage to call earlier.

"There's loads of time," Eileen insisted. "Don't keep fussing. It's not like you. We've only a mile to drive, and you know you'd be the very person to complain if we got there uncomfortably early, and found ourselves the first arrivals."

Everything comes to him who waits, even the Setting Sun fly. The driver, on appearing, acknowledged himself to be ten minutes late, but explained the delay to his own satisfaction if not to that of his hirers, by intimating that he had been "fetching another party."

When at length they neared the Court, Belle was so excited she could scarcely sit still. Her eyes shone, her cheeks glowed, she kept rising up

to look through the small front window, which, as the driver led the horse up the avenue, formed a point of vantage.

Seen at night with its long range of windows illuminated, Uplands Court made an imposing spectacle.

"Fancy Dr. Gundry owning that place some day!" soliloquised Eileen, putting Belle's unspoken thought into words. "I suppose he will require to keep his aunt in good humour, or she may disinherit him. Though I must say I can't imagine his toadying to anybody."

To the passenger's surprise, the conveyance, led by its shambling driver, instead of driving up to the porticoed front door, seemed to be proceeding in the direction of a side entrance.

"Stop, driver! where are you going?" demanded Belle in a stage whisper through the little window. "Why don't you drive up to the front door?"

The man pulled his fore-lock.

"It's all right, miss," he replied, in a confidential whisper. "I has my orders. The porter at the lodge, he ses: 'Drop un at the side door,' ses 'e. That's where I took Miss Ginger, too."

"Strange not to use the principal entrance on an occasion like this!" said Eileen. But Belle was

too busy giving a last pull up to her long white gloves and gathering up the tail of her gown preparatory to alighting, to take any notice.

A footman, somewhat supercilious in manner, as though for the moment occupying a position beneath that to which he was accustomed, indicated the way to the ladies' cloak-room. It proved to be a transformed pantry. The shelves and tables were already heaped with a motley array of wraps, from the faded antiquity of the swansdown-trimmed cashmere opera-cloak to the utilitarian waterproof of comparatively recent date.

"Why! how late we seem. Everybody seems to have come ages ago. And yet it is just half-past eight now. What a lot of people are here already! I'm certain that is Mrs. Probit's Sunday bonnet." Eileen indicated an erection with strident purple plumes. "I've sat too often behind it on Sunday not to hail it as an old friend."

They had just succeeded in finding places for their smart evening wraps, when the sound of tuning instruments made them hasten in search of the company. Belle, her silver-wreathed head held upright, led the way, Eileen, looking daintily pretty in her fluffy pink frock, following close.

Something scarce congruous in their appearance

may have struck the servitor detailed to show visitors to their seats, for approaching respectfully he inquired their names. That information gained, it evidently decided him as to the social standing of the new-comers; for he at once led them to a door opening into the rear of the large ball-room, where, on a curtained stage at the further end, the performance was apparently about to take place.

"I'm afraid you've come a bit late to expect seats, ladies," he remarked, in a tone whose familiarity his hearers were quick to resent. "We've been pretty well crowded up this half-hour. But I'll try to get you squeezed in somewheres."

"There seem to be plenty of vacant seats in front. We shall find places there." Belle had caught sight of sundry rows of empty chairs just before the footlights. Not noting the red rope that railed them off from the bulk of the audience, she imagined that modesty had kept the early arrivals from appropriating them.

"These is reserved for Madame's guests, Miss; but I think I can get 'em to sit a bit closer here."

As he spoke, a ripple in the company heralded the entrance, through a door near the front, of the dumpling form of Mrs. Chalfont, attended by a

bevy of guests. Evidently they had just dined, for all seemed in high good humour.

Bowing graciously to the commonality that sat uncomfortably jammed together in the unreserved portion of the apartment, Mrs. Chalfont took her position on a raised seat in the centre of the front row. Eileen observed that she kept vacant an important-looking chair on her right hand. Evidently the most important of all the company had proved dilatory.

The attendant had been as good as his word. With some difficulty he had succeeded in finding them a modicum of space between Mr. Probit and a burly individual whom the Flemings recognised as the gentleman who, when not engaged with more engrossing matters, condescended to supply them with beef.

In the row just behind the charmed line, and consequently as near as possible to the charmed circle, they caught a glimpse of Mrs. Hewson, her restless head adorned by a green bird which perched upon a tinsel travesty of a Grecian fillet.

There was no sign of Gundry. Eileen wondered if he carried his distaste to feminine society so far as to ignore even his aunt's chosen associates.

Whatever Belle may have thought, she kept

silence. Sitting crushed up among the rustics and their wives, she looked queenly, even though the colour had faded from her cheeks, the animation from her bearing. Understanding what an overwhelming blow this sudden disillusionment must be to one who had raised such high hopes upon the mere prospect of the occasion, Eileen would fain have tried by word or look to express her sympathy. But Belle sat immovable, as though turned to stone.

Concerning the entertainment, which consisted of three one-act playlets, neither of the sisters retained a vivid recollection. The travelling theatrical company hired to amuse Mrs. Chalfont's guests was neither better nor worse than the average of its kind. The floor being on a level, the room was ill-adapted to seeing. Eileen, being small, saw little more than the backs of the audience who were seated immediately before her. Belle, who was taller, may have actually witnessed more, but what passed before her sight she viewed with unseeing eyes. All she was conscious of was a dominating resentment against everything and everybody—especially against Dr. Felix Gundry. In her heart of hearts she blamed him, and him alone, as the instigator of the insult that had been thrust upon her.

"I didn't ask for an invitation. He has deliberately gone out of his way to heap ignominy upon me," she told herself over and over again, as she sat with burning eyes fixed upon a stage scene she did not see. "Why could he not have left me alone? Why try to show how little he thought of me? Oh, it is insulting—insulting!"

She would fain have returned home at once, but something—perhaps a desire to confront Gundry that he might see how different she was from the others on whose level he believed her to stand—held her back.

The hours dragged by. The room, badly ventilated because Mrs. Chalfont dreaded an open window, became hotter and hotter. The air was heavy with the odour of tobacco-scented rainment, and sickly with the smell of cheap perfume.

The programme proceeded. It appeared to be humorous, for at the witty sallies the bulk of the audience laughed uproariously, rocking to and fro with delight. Yet to two of the number the action seemed meaningless, the duration of each item interminable.

Sitting wedged in between Mr. Probit and her butcher, Belle's attention became fixed upon the side door on the further side of the dividing rope,

through which at any moment she expected to see Gundry make his tardy entrance. But the minutes crawled by without a sign of him.

The state chair on the right of the hostess was still unoccupied. From a communicative neighbour Eileen heard a rumour that some great lady had been expected to fill it. Evidently she had failed to keep her engagement, and Eileen rejoiced wickedly in the knowledge that the patronising mistress of Uplands Court had also sustained a disappointment.

At last the curtain dropped upon the final scene. Mrs. Chalfont, rising amid the applause intended as tribute to the performance, graciously bowed her be-wigged and be-diamonded head in various directions, as though in personal acceptance of the plaudits. Then, attended by the *élite* among her guests, she sailed away with as much dignity of carriage as could be achieved by five foot square.

As the last of the favoured ones vanished through the door, Belle, who had watched their exit as though fascinated, started up grasping her sister's hand.

"Come!" she spoke sharply. "Let us get out of this."

But the passage was already blocked by a hearty

and hungry crowd, on their way to storm the refreshment buffet: an institution that their previous experiences had shown awaited them in the servants' hall.

Jostled in amidst the hot hilarious throng, the sisters found themselves forced along, unable to diverge to right or left.

"Just take a holt of me, Miss," said kindly Mr. Probit, grinning benevolently down on Eileen. "I know the way."

The provision made, as befitted the appetites it catered for, was substantial. Huge jugs of cider (Eileen suspected them of being bedroom ewers), great cans of beer, piles of sandwiches, heaps of apple-turnovers, of jam-puffs, and of veal patties were among the comestibles.

Mrs. Hewson, the green parroquet vibrating with its wearer's energy, was already busy. From the alacrity of her movements and her concentration upon the work of the moment, she had evidently resolved to sample every species of viand.

"Didn't I tell you what delightful entertainments Mrs. Chalfont gave, Miss Fleming? Charming, positively charming, hasn't it been?" she snatched a moment to say. "And the commissariat arrangements,—so liberal, aren't they? As I said to dear

Mrs. Chalfont, she always does everything *en princesse.*"

"Does Dr. Gundry not honour his aunt's parties?" After the customary sisterly fashion, Eileen put the question she knew Belle was too proud to ask.

"Oh, wasn't he here, Miss Eileen? He meant to come, I know. He said as much when he called this morning. I suppose some troublesome patient detained him. And yet everybody must have known he was expected here. Really, some people have no consciences in dealing with their medical men!"

Taking advantage of the moment when Mrs. Hewson turned to make a predatory swoop upon a passing dish of veal patties, Belle impatiently drew her sister away.

"Come."

"But I'm hungry," Eileen made half-jesting protest.

"Come. I shall—*choke* if I stay here another moment," Belle's whisper was instinct with strangled misery, and Eileen offered no further resistance.

It was raining heavily, when, after securing their wraps they reached the side door. No one being at hand to summon their carriage, they had to

endure a long wait in a draughty passage, before the Setting Sun fly, its driver cross at being routed out so soon, was brought round.

Inside the trap, Belle sat mute; and Eileen wisely refrained from offering verbal sympathy. They had passed through the great gates, and had turned into the high road, when they encountered a brougham driving rapidly in the direction of Uplands Court.

"Surely that was Dr. Gundry's carriage?" conjectured Eileen.

But Belle, pale and outwardly apathetic, did not reply.

"Belle—I'm certain he never dreamt we would be treated like that. I'm sure he meant to be there, and to see that we enjoyed ourselves. Some bad case must have detained him, and he is hurrying up now—you saw how fast the brougham was going—expecting to find us amongst his aunt's special guests."

But Belle still vouchsafed no reply. Though now her lips were compressed, her breast heaving.

The short drive ended, she went into the cottage, and, passing directly upstairs, entered her room, and locked the door behind her.

Knowing that during the day Belle had been too

excited to eat, Eileen went to the drawing-room where the fire still burned, and where a supper-tray had been prepared in readiness for their return. Making some tea, she carried it up-stairs; but she knocked in vain at Belle's door. It did not open that night.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### The Morning After

THE Belle Fleming of the evening of the Uplands Court Theatricals had been a gay, almost girlish being, a radiant creature, one who felt the crisis of her fate to be near, and who joyed to go forth to meet it.

The Belle Fleming of that crucial period—the morning after the party—was a cold, taciturn woman with pinched features, an embittered heart, and the soul of an avenger.

Eileen, happy in the reception of one of her lover's characteristic letters which, for fear of obtruding her bliss upon her sister's misery, she read furtively, holding it beneath the edge of the table at breakfast, felt as though recent events had increased the insignificant difference in their ages by twenty years.

When Eileen, rendered apprehensive by last night's rebuff, had knocked hesitatingly at Belle's

door with the intention of urging her to rest in bed, she was surprised to find the door open promptly to her knock, and to see that Belle was ready as usual to come down to breakfast.

By tacit agreement no reference was made to the Uplands Court fiasco. That it was not to be made matter of comment, even between themselves, Eileen concluded with regret. Belle ate, though it seemed an effort to her to force the food down; and she made a praiseworthy effort at general conversation.

Though he was uppermost in both their minds, Dr. Gundry was not mentioned. Whatever Belle's attitude regarding him might be, Eileen guessed that it was already decided upon. She guessed too that no attempt on her part would avail to alter it. How so contradictory a personality as Felix Gundry would view the matter, Eileen failed to formulate an opinion. However, she was not long left in doubt. Gundry was a man of prompt action. They had scarcely finished breakfast when he came.

Eileen, whose back was towards the window, was warned of his approach as much by the sudden flushing and almost as sudden paling of Belle's face as by the sound of a masculine tread on the brick flags of the path.

During the long moment that transpired between the echo of his authoritative knock and the appearance of Cecilia to announce that Dr. Gundry was waiting in the drawing-room to see Miss Fleming, Belle tried to appear indifferent; though when she sought to make a casual remark a tell-tale catch broke her voice. But when she rose to join him, the very intensity of her resentment seemed to have stiffened her nerves. She looked hard, cold, bitterly inflexible.

"Belle."

Eileen spoke half timidly putting out an arresting hand as Belle was passing her chair.

"Well?"

"I'm certain Dr. Gundry knew nothing about it. You won't be too hard on him?"

Belle Fleming was in that state of nervous tension when a word stung like a red-hot wire laid on a nerve. Snatching her sleeve from Eileen's grasp, she left the room without vouchsafing a word in reply.

She entered the drawing-room to find Gundry awaiting her, hat in hand. At certain poignant moments conventionalities are forgotten. Belle did not ask her guest to be seated, nor did she give him greeting. Standing upright, she confronted him

silently as though he were a stranger with whose business she had yet to become acquainted.

"I came about last night."

At no time is it easy to address an absolutely impassive hearer, and when one's office is a combination of the subtle task of apologising for the action of a near female relative, and of the yet more delicate mission of declaring one's own passion, the position is only tenable by a man of peculiarly robust mental fibre.

The incidents of the previous night had proved a revelation to Felix Gundry. For several months he had suspected Belle Fleming of usurping a larger proportion of his thoughts than he had esteemed desirable. The lamentable occurrence at Uplands Court—his arrival unavoidably late to discover that, so far from being classed with his aunt's special guests as he had expected, the Flemings had been cooped up in the crowd, and had left without being received or in any way having their presence recognised by the hostess—had aroused emotions that threw a flash-light on the state of his affections.

Upon Gundry promptly seeking Mrs. Chalfont with the intention of demanding an explanation of the affront dealt his friends, he found her at supper surrounded by the more honoured members of the

company, and was constrained, greatly against his inclination, to defer advancing his protest until a more convenient season.

His heart up in arms for the slighted strangers, Gundry feeling the desire of at once giving expression to his regret, had driven to Lavender Lea, only to find the windows darkened, and the little household evidently at rest.

His sympathy for the aggrieved waxing greater in proportion as his resentment towards the aggressor increased, he drove home to the Battlements, where he passed the remainder of the night debating the situation. Dawn brought the resolve to seek Belle Fleming and, without delay, reveal the state of his feelings by asking her to become his wife.

In the night-watches the task he had set himself had seemed an easy, even an enticing one. But when he entered the bright little room that had afforded him so many glimpses of sweet home life, some indefinable blight appeared to have fallen upon it.

A woman would have explained the effect by saying that, as the hour was still early, the room had not yet been prepared for occupation. Gundry, manlike, failed to notice detail; it was the general

effect that impressed him. He did not see that last night's ashes still littered the grate, that the tea-service wherein Eileen had made her solitary tea still cumbered the side-table, that the scarcely perceptible film of dust clouded the polish of the furniture.

An atmosphere of excitement, whereof the visible signs were the fluffy pink fan that rested on the mantelpiece, and Eileen's long white evening mantle that lay where she had thrown it on the head of the sofa, detracted from the customary pleasant repose of the room. Even the mignonette and heliotrope in the pots on the long low window-sill looked less fragrantly fresh than of yore—an effect probably owing to the lessening tenure of their growth—but that, Gundry was hardly horticulturist enough to remember.

When Belle entered, he felt as though the greatest change of all were visible in her: as though the varied Belles he had known—the lackadaisical patient of their first interview: the exhausted storm-beaten Belle that he had half-carried into his house that bitter March night: the Belle who had proved so tender a nurse: the white-clad Belle who looked so graceful amid her lavender-tinted blossoms—had vanished, their place usurped by the pale cold

stranger who waited so dispassionately to hear what he had to say.

"I came about last night," he repeated.

"Yes—you came about last night?"

There was the antithesis of encouragement in the lifeless tone, but Gundry proceeded.

"I could not delay until I had told you how sorry I was that things did not turn out as I had anticipated."

"The thing is over. Is there anything to be gained by discussing it?"

"There must have been some mistake about the instructions. I am certain Mrs. Chalfont——"

"Pray do not let us review the subject further. For my part, the matter is at an end."

"I'm sure nothing could have been further from my aunt's intentions than that any guest should——"

"Please do not apologise. My sister and myself were treated as well as the majority of Mrs. Chalfont's guests. If she chooses to invite people to her house, and then offers them the privileges of her servants' hall, she is probably acting according to her notions of hospitality. Those who accept her invitations knowing what to expect have only themselves to blame. Unfortunately my sister and

myself, when we went to Uplands Court, did so under the mistaken impression that we went as Mrs. Chalfont's guests, not as the equals of her flunkeys."

During the long sleepless hours, Belle had rehearsed over and over again all the stinging, incisive, unanswerable things that, when occasion served, she would say to Gundry, regarding what she chose to consider the insult *he* had thrown upon them. In the blind unreasoning of suffering, she cast the blame solely upon the one who held most power to make her suffer.

The burning words rushed to her cold lips. All the suppressed bitterness of months found vent. Even while she spoke the foolish words, she knew she would regret them; but the savage joy of giving pain urged her on.

"*We* were ignorant, but *you* knew. You knew in what a ridiculous position the seeming civility was inducing us to place ourselves. Was that why at the last moment you had the grace to absent yourself?"

She hurled the taunt at him.

For a moment, Gundry was silent. When he spoke, it was with an unusual gentleness added to his customary restraint of manner.

"No, that was not the reason. I was unavoidably detained—professionally." He hesitated, al-

most as though on the point of making a further explanation. "The instant I was free, I hastened up to the Court, to find you already gone. It was too late then to call here, or I would have done so. Believe me, I am more grieved and affected by the blunder than you can be."

But the soft answer completely failed to turn away Belle Fleming's wrath. It was not last night's slight alone that she had to avenge. There were all the dreary winter months when the Strete Tything folks had eyed askance the lonely strangers within their gates, all the apparently combined ignoring to which the Flemings had bravely affected indifference, but which, especially on the part of the proud Belle, had cut to the quick. And, as so frequently happens when long suppressed indignation finds exit, it is an absolutely innocent person that it overwhelms.

"I am convinced that none can regret the occurrence more deeply than does my aunt——"

"Did Mrs. Chalfont commission you to bring me this message?"

"I had no opportunity of speaking to her alone last night. She was surrounded by her guests."

"Then there is nothing further to be said. If you have not even taken the trouble to let Mrs.

Chalfont know that you disapprove of the way she treats the people she invites to her house, it is quite useless to prolong our discussion." Stepping to the bell, she rang it sharply. "Good-morning."

And Gundry, his words unspoken, his mission unvoiced, found himself being shown out by the wondering Cecilia.

"Why, he's never gone already!" cried Eileen, running in from doctoring some sick chickens as the sound of his wheels died away, a gaping bird in one hand, in the other a feather dipped in turpentine. "Oh, Belle! I was certain it was something like that that prevented him from going to the Court last night. I was sure nothing less urgent would have kept him away."

"Like what? What was urgent? Don't talk in silly enigmas."

The acerbity in Belle's voice told the story of the past interview more plainly than words.

"Why—didn't Dr. Gundry tell you?" Eileen opened wide eyes in blank amazement.

"Dr. Gundry told me nothing."

"Well, Mrs. Campkins has just run in to tell us that poor Mr. Hewson is dead. He died last night while his wife was watching the Theatricals. Isn't it awful? He had been worse in the morning, and

Dr. Gundry didn't wish her to leave him. But you know Mrs. Hewson. She wouldn't miss the fun for anything. So at night she told their maid—quite a young girl, she is—that she thought her husband was so much better that she would go to the Court for half-an-hour. And, not very long after she had gone, an attack of coughing brought back a return of the hemorrhage, and, even though Dr. Gundry chanced to call on his way to the party, and never left him a moment, the poor man died about half-past ten. He was all alone when the Doctor found him so bad, the maid had run out on an errand. They say Dr. Gundry wouldn't let Mrs. Hewson be sent for, he was so angry at her having neglected her husband when he was in such a dangerous condition. They say Mrs. Hewson is taking on in an awful way."

Eileen paused, waiting for the comment that did not come. The chicken in her hand gasped feebly.

"So you see, Belle, it wasn't Dr. Gundry's fault, after all. He couldn't possibly have foretold poor Mr. Hewson's death. Could he?"

But the flow of language that but a moment earlier had distinguished Miss Fleming seemed unaccountably to have deserted her.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### Sharper than Serpent's tooth

WHEN Gundry, by exercise of the dual licence of a nephew and of a medical adviser, was shown into Mrs. Chalfont's room at Uplands Court, the graciously-smiling dame who had bent her plump shoulders in recognition of the plaudits of the previous evening had vanished. It was a flabby, somewhat dyspeptic, and wholly jaded and dissatisfied lady who put out a heavily-ringed hand in languid greeting.

"Dear Felix! So good of you to come."

"Knocked over, hey?"

Her nephew's tone was scarcely as sympathetic as might have been esteemed politic; but then Felix Gundry had always shown a lamentable lack of diplomacy in his dealings with his moneyed relative.

"Exhausted, Felix. Positively *exhausted*. No one realises what an expenditure of nervous force those entertainments involve on the hostess."

"Of course the poor darling is simply exhausted

—worn to ribbons," chimed in Miss Rodd, who, found seated by her patroness's bedside discussing the morning's post, had fluttered apologetically at being discovered in what she termed her *négligé*—her graceful designation for a clinging garment that in Gundry's unlearned eyes bore the semblance of a somewhat skimpy morning wrapper.

"I warned her she must expect to be worn to a shadow" (the outlines suggested by the rise and fall of the rose-satin quilt premised a considerable solidity of bulk in the aforesaid shadow) "if she insisted upon spending herself to make everyone so happy."

Gundry, who had laid an inquisitory hand upon his aunt's wrist and ascertained that her pulse was comparatively vigorous, wasted no time beating about the bush.

"I want you to feel well enough to get up and go out at once to call for two of your guests whom you certainly failed to make happy."

Perhaps Arabella had a suspicion of what lay behind Gundry's words; for she cast a furtive glance at him. The sallow forehead beneath her frizz of drab-hued hair flushed unbecomingly.

"Somebody else not satisfied! That's always the way. Arabella, I'm sure I've said a hundred

times that no matter what one does, somebody is certain to have a grievance." The invalid's tone, if less languishing, was decidedly testy. "Who is it this time? Who has been complaining?"

"I am the sole complainant. As a favour to myself, I asked you to invite two friends of mine, new-comers to the village. They accepted the invitation in all good faith, to find—what? That they were roped off among ploughboys, and expected to eat in the servant's hall!"

"Arabella sent the card. I told her I was sure you wouldn't like it. Besides, there were no ploughboys there. Anyone who told you so was telling a horrid lie."

"How was anyone to know that you meant the Flemings to be treated as special guests?" Arabella was hotly on the defensive. "You spoke of them merely as patients of yours, not as friends. I remember distinctly. And they live in a poky cottage, and keep one quite young servant," she added, thereby revealing an unexpected knowledge of the circumstances of the people under discussion.

"The Misses Fleming are ladies. Their father was a man of eminence in my own profession." Ignoring Miss Rodd completely, Gundry addressed himself to his aunt. "It was at my express request

you invited them to Uplands Court. May I ask if when they came you had the grace to receive them?"

"But really you know, Felix, that is the worst of having such large gatherings. It is impossible to receive everybody. The year before last when I had the Living Pictures ("Oh! *wasn't* that a success!" interjected Miss Rodd), I made a point of shaking hands with everyone, both on arrival and departure. Three pairs of gloves were ruined, my hand was almost pulp, and my arm was so rheumatic that I had to wear it in a sling for days. Those country folks don't realise how strong they are. Really, I felt that, in my state of health, I *dared* not risk it again."

Gundry had little sympathy with the good lady's fancied ailments. Paying no heed to her plaint, he went on with his argument as though she had not spoken.

"The ladies I refer to are social equals of your own. The one point we have to consider is that they were inveigled to the Court under false pretences. Do you think they would have come had they anticipated sitting crowded up beside their own butcher and baker?

"But Felix, Hoblyn and Thoms are most esti-

mable men. I have the greatest respect for them. I have given them my custom for years." Mrs. Chalfont was temporising, and doing it clumsily. "And if people come to a place without introductions, and live in a village cottage, as Arabella says, how is one to know what they consider themselves? Really it is impossible to make class distinctions!"

"But don't you see that it is from the very fact of your having made class distinctions that the trouble has arisen? You invite a certain number of people to your house——"

("A hundred and seventy-three" parenthesised Miss Rodd.)

"——A small proportion of these you receive graciously, seat beside yourself, ask to eat at your table. The remainder you admit by the side entrance, as though the front hall would be polluted by their presence——"

"You know, Felix, that arrangement was made for the convenience of entering the ball-room where the performance was to be. Besides, the village people always come so ridiculously early that it would have been a nuisance their arriving while we were at dinner."

Mrs. Chalfont was on the verge of tears, but her inexorable nephew spared her nothing.

"You jam them up on backless wooden benches at the back of a hall where they may count themselves lucky if they see or hear anything, while they have the inestimable privilege of viewing you, and the select few you have graciously chosen to consider your equals, seated upon comfortable chairs safely roped off from the possibility of their intrusion. Good God! Do you need anything to point out the ludicrous, blatant vulgarity of the thing?"

There was no question as to Mrs. Chalfont's tears now.

"It is cruel of you, Felix, bullying me like that, when you know how exhausted I am, and how disappointed I was at Lady Turntowers not coming, after I had told everybody I expected her. Of course I had to reserve a special place for her. I couldn't expect her to mix with everybody. Could I?"

"The point in question is simply this—" proceeded Gundry, ruthlessly dragging his unwilling victim back to the subject under discussion: "You owe Miss Fleming an apology." Oddly enough it was only the insult to Belle that weighed with Gundry. He had almost lost sight of the fact that Eileen had met with precisely the same reception.

"Would it not do if you explained that it was quite a mistake, Felix? Or Arabella would write a note—Wouldn't you, Arabella? Quite a nice little note."

Felix was adamant.

"Nothing but a prompt personal visit, and a full apology will be of the slightest service."

"I am so tired. I had palpitation in the night. I am certain my heart is weak, though none of the specialists has found out yet what is actually wrong with it. Excitement is dreadfully bad for me. Really, Felix, this is very unkind of you."

"It is a lovely warm day. A little drive will do you good," was Gundry's only reply; and though she still feebly protested, Mrs. Chalfont knew—as did her tyrant—that the matter would end by her putting on her best bonnet, and driving in state to Lavender Lea, to eat humble pie.

"To think of all I would have done for Felix Gundry, if only he hadn't been so independent, and then to find him treat me like this!" she sobbed to her confidante when Gundry had driven off to visit his neglected patients.

Since his schoolboy days when the orphan lad had insisted upon choosing his own line of education, and had chosen it wisely too, experience had

taught his relative that, when Felix Gundry said a thing must be done, it usually *was* done.

When he had gone, Mrs. Chalfont whimpered a little, scolded a good deal, then—still vigorously avowing that nothing on earth would induce her to call for the Flemings—ordered the carriage for three o'clock, and began discussing the rival merits of her state garments, with a view to the exigencies of the occasion.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### Tea on the Moor

Not without many groans at the tyranny of the despot Felix, Mrs. Chalfont, braced by a hearty luncheon, and stimulated to the exertion by a glass of champagne, permitted herself to be arrayed in her best toque and her most elaborate carriage cloak: a garment that, even though it had been specially designed with the intent of making its wearer appear broader than Nature already had, could scarce better have achieved its purpose.

It was a brilliant autumn afternoon. The hedge-banks were aglow with wild fruits. Through the hazel and thorn the sinuous stems of the black briony wreathed its wealth of orange berries. The delicate blossoms of the field-rose had given place to clusters of globular scarlet hips. Above the undergrowth of goldening bracken the spindle-tree displayed its rosy-waxen seed-vessels; the guelder-

rose suspended its reddening clusters. The atmosphere seemed flooded with golden light, while over the distance a blue haze rested softly.

It was an ideal day of early autumn, a day worthy remembrance. Yet as Mrs. Chalfont drove, all reluctantly, towards Strete Tything she had no eyes for the gracious beauty surrounding her: no thought save for the dreaded ordeal awaiting her. For once the skilled flattery of her jackal fell upon deaf ears. Even the obeisances of the villagers, which usually put her into an enviable frame of mind, failed on this occasion to soothe her perturbed spirit.

Clutching her gold card-case, she sat, her clouded brow overshadowed by her too smart toque, her shoulders burdened by the weight of her over-gorgeous mantle, wondering gloomily what she would say, how she would frame the required extenuation: thinking that never had the mile that separated Uplands Court from Strete Tything seemed so short.

"Why! Here we are, nearly at the village already!" she was saying; when the carriage, turning sharply where the way to the moor branched off from the main road, narrowly escaped collision with a pony-phaeton containing three ladies.

Mrs. Chalfont's coachman, as became the servitor of so wealthy a dame, arrogantly held his ground. Luckily the young lady who drove the phaeton had her wits about her, and the incident passed without mishap.

"Did you see who that was?" whispered Arabella eagerly. "Those were the Flemings we so nearly ran into!"

"Thank heaven!" devoutly exclaimed Mrs. Chalfont. "Then they won't be at home. I'll pay the call, all the same, and then Felix can't complain."

"I wonder who the lady with them was. I hadn't heard of their having any visitors."

"It sounds absurd to say so, Arabella, but she seemed to have a strong resemblance to Lady Turntowers. Her hair was just the Rextham colour. You remember the old duke had it, and all her brothers."

"But dear Mrs. Chalfont, the Flemings' friend had on an old drab felt hat with a pheasant-feather stuck in the side. Besides, even if it was Lady Turntowers, how would she know them?"

"Oh, of course, I know the idea is ridiculous. It is just some chance resemblance."

The court equipage had drawn up with a clatter

before the modest green-painted gate of Lavender Lea. Mrs. Chalfont would have despatched her footman to ascertain if anyone was at home, and to leave cards, had not curiosity prompted Arabella to alight and make inquiry in person. She could not resist the opportunity of obtaining even a cursory glance—through the doorway—into the home of one whom she chose to esteem her rival in Gundry's affections.

The young maid's admission that her mistresses were out driving, Miss Rodd met with a simulated regret that invited further confidence. They were driving then? In what direction did they go? Miss Rodd thought they might perhaps have crossed on the way.

Cecilia acknowledged that her mistresses had gone up to the moor, to gather blackberries and take tea.

Miss Rodd wondered if it could possibly have been their carriage they had passed just outside the village. She was disposed to be doubtful on the point, as that phaeton had *three* ladies in it.

"That *was* them!" cried Cecilia, eager to assure so pleasant-spoken a lady that her supposition had been right. "There *was* another lady with them. It was——" she paused before announcing with an

emphasis worthy the information—"Her ladyship the Countess of Turntowers!"

"*Well!*" When she re-entered the carriage Miss Rodd's expression was one gigantic mark of exclamation. As the daughter of a nobleman—albeit of the poorest Irish nobleman who ever gained a livelihood from his barren ancestral acres—Miss Rodd lacked Mrs. Chalfont's reverence for one of Lady Turntower's aristocratic lineage. Her strong resentment arose from annoyance that the Flemings were proving that they knew anyone worth knowing. "You were right, after all," she whispered as the carriage drove on. "It was the Countess."

"Good heavens! How do people in their position know people in hers?" rejoined Mrs. Chalfont, her natural indignation at the inequality audible even through her guarded whisper.

"Heaven *may* know; I don't. But they are evidently quite chummy together. She seems to be spending the day at the cottage. And now they've gone up to take tea on the moor and gather blackberries!" Arabella's tone implied her scorn of the unaristocratic occupation.

"I always said Lady Turntowers had no sense of dignity," commented Mrs. Chalfont. "Imagine her neglecting my invitation on the plea that it was

too long a drive to the Court, and the very next day driving a mile farther to visit those people, who have not even had the courtesy to invite anyone to meet her! Drive to the Battlements," she commanded, raising her voice, and poking the coachman energetically in the back with her sunshade. "I must see if Felix knew of this intimacy. If he did, it would be just like him not to tell me."

"Felix!" she exclaimed, bursting into the study where Dr. Gundry sat cutting the pages of a medical journal, "did you know that these Flemings of yours were on intimate terms with Lady Turntowers?"

"Did I know what? No,—I knew their families had some kind of an old friendship——"

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me?"

Mrs. Chalfont's tone was pathetic in the extreme.

Gundry laughed. "I suppose I didn't think the fact would interest you sufficiently."

"Well, Felix, I must say I think it mean of you not to tell me." Tears of mortification were not far from Mrs. Chalfont's small pale eyes. "Don't you understand that if you had only had sense enough to tell me, it would have made all the difference? You see what a terribly awkward position

you have placed me in. Now you must help me to get out of it."

What do you want me to do?"

Gundry was in a far from smiling mood, or the humorous side of the situation might have struck him.

"The Countess is with the Flemings to-day—Perhaps they told you they expected her?" she broke off sharply to ask, as the suspicion struck her.

"They did not."

"Well, I must say I consider that most unneighbourly of them——"

("Sneaky,—sneaky in the extreme," amended Miss Rodd, from the background.)

—"How can people who are so close about their affairs ever expect to make new friends? If they don't give confidence, how can they expect to get it?"

"He that hath friends must show himself friendly," chimed in Miss Rodd, who was skilled in inapposite scriptural quotation.

"Well, at any rate, Lady Turntowers is spending to-day at Lavender Lea, (such a ridiculously affected name for a cottage!) and just now they are up on the moor taking tea. She ought to have called for me. Because when I heard that she was

one of the few ladies at the shooting-party at Barcombe, I invited her specially to my party—(you know we had met in town)—and as her reply did not reach me till this morning I expected her up to the last moment. Now, Felix,"—Mrs. Chalfont had assumed a wheedling air—" don't you think it would put everything right if you drove up over the moor road with Arabella and me, and when we came upon them I would introduce you to Lady Turntowers, and you could introduce me to the Flemings—they are your friends, you know—and I could invite them all to dinner some night very soon."

But to his aunt's annoyance, Gundry refused obstinately to become a party to this plan, which, as he guessed, had emanated from the younger woman's shrewder mind. The flabby tissue that served Mrs. Chalfont for brain, would never have originated so crafty a scheme.

Unwilling to abandon a plan that seemed so simple of execution, the conspirators resolved to carry it out themselves. Returning to the waiting carriage, they drove over the moor road between the glorious banks of wine-red heather and late-flowering furze.

In her daily drives Mrs. Chalfont was not given

to leaving the well-beaten track. And the way was rough. At every lurch of the landau she imagined the backs of her servants expressed an augmented degree of mute protest. She wavered, and would readily have given up the quest, but Arabella was of firmer purpose, her curiosity regarding one, the soothing of whose wounded pride Gundry had so much at heart, making her eager to see Belle. The Countess she reckoned a secondary matter; Eileen, the astute maiden did not take into consideration.

At length, near by an opening of the heathery banks, they came upon the little phaeton. The pony, nose in bag, dozed placidly, tied to a sapling. Evidently its occupants were camping close at hand, for the odour of a wood-fire hung fragrant on the still air.

"But won't our being here look queer?" asked Mrs. Chalfont nervously, after they had alighted, and had taken several tentative steps in the direction where, screened by furze and blackberry vines, they guessed the objects of their search might be found. "Won't they think we have followed them up?"

"Queer? Not a bit," responded Arabella airily. "If they seem surprised at the coincidence of our

meeting, we can just explain that we have been botanising." To lend colour to the scheme, she hastily picked a cluster of eyebright and a spray of lingering milk-wort. "It was somewhere on this moor that I got my specimen of the autumnal lady's-tresses—*spiranthes autumnalis.*" During a fleeting period wherein she aspired to the hand of an eminent, though unfortunately obtuse, scientist, Miss Rodd had acquired a smattering of botany. "Perhaps it may have been quite near here. Let us go down and look for more."

"But if we come upon them, won't it seem dreadfully obtrusive?" Mrs. Chalfont's courage was already ebbing away. "I do wish Felix had come with us."

"Obtrusive? Poof! Not a bit of it. If they are surprised, we shall say that we chanced to be driving by, and alighted specially to try to get that rather rare orchis for my collection."

Her scruples thus overcome, Mrs. Chalfont tripped dubiously forward on her plump unaccustomed feet, her friend walking briskly in front.

"They can't be far away. I saw the smoke rising above the bushes, and I'm certain I heard voices just now," she was whispering reassuringly over her shoulder, when a sudden turn of the track

revealed to their sight the trio seated cosily at tea some little distance off.

Eileen was cutting thin bread and butter. Belle was pouring tea into the cups set on a fringed doyley spread on the short crisp grass. While the Countess——! Mrs. Chalfont gasped when she realised that the august lady, hatless, and with a loosened coil of the Rextham hair hanging untidily down her back, was kneeling in front of the wood-fire, toasting mushrooms on the end of a toasting-fork, while she caught the falling juice on an enamelled plate.

There was such an air of good-comradeship in the little group, that Mrs. Chalfont, who after all was not wholly vulgar, stopped short, and pulled back her more intrusive companion, before the discovery of their invasion had time to raise a jarring note.

"Come away! Come away!" Though she spoke in a whisper, her tone was decidedly authoritative, and Arabella was surprised into obeying it.

"But it would have been such a good opportunity of meeting Lady Turntowers, and of making the Flemings' acquaintance quite without ceremony," she protested, as they retraced their steps to where

the carriage waited. "We'll never get such a chance again!"

But, for once, Mrs. Chalfont's sense of expediency had triumphed over her companion's curiosity.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### The Major Hopes

THE little party returned from their afternoon tea on the moor to find Mrs. Chalfont's cards, and in addition two notes of invitation that, immediately after her return home, she had despatched by special messenger to Lavender Lea. The missives, which were couched in the most gracious of terms, besought Lady Turntowers and her friends to dine at Uplands Court on any near date that would suit their convenience.

The Countess, who, finding herself bored at a shooting ten miles distant, had stolen a day and driven over to Strete Tything to surprise her friends with an unheralded visit, chuckled wickedly on perusal of Mrs. Chalfont's epistles. For Eileen had snatched a moment when their zeal in mushroom-gathering had led them beyond earshot of Belle, to confide in her old friend the full and true story of the previous night's fiasco.

"Well, what night shall we fix?" asked Lady

Turntowers, laughing. "What night shall I get into my war-paint and drive ten miles to bandy compliments with that old humbug?"

"No night will suit us," Belle said decisively. "Besides, we are going to town on Tuesday to stay with the Horneckes till after the wedding. And we haven't a day to spare. Eileen has all her dresses to get yet."

So the expectant hostess had the mortification of receiving a couple of notes whose punctiliously polite declension coming in response to her gush suggested plainly that the desired intimacy with either Lady Turntowers or the Misses Fleming was yet a long way off.

A few days afterwards Lavender Lea was deserted, and a month later the village gossips were excited by accounts of Eileen's wedding, and by the surprising information—authentic because vouched for by the public press—that after the ceremony the bridal pair had departed for the Riviera to pass their honeymoon at Mon Plaisir, the Earl of Turntowers' villa on the Mediterranean.

The excitement of the great event ended, there began the bustle of Mrs. Hornecke's preparations and departure for Canada, where she had arranged

to spend the winter with some relatives to whom she had long promised a visit.

She had been anxious that Belle should accompany her. But, though the close companionship afforded by Mrs. Hornecke's week of suffering, and of Belle's patient attendance, had bred between them a warm attachment, Belle resolutely refused to leave England.

She was heartsore, full of that most galling of tortures—the misery that comes from the knowledge that one's trouble is the result of one's own folly. When she thought, as in each unoccupied moment her fretted soul forced her to think, of that morning when Gundry had humbled himself to come to her with apology for slights of which he had been guiltless, that black morning when in the bitterness of her mortification and wounded pride she had opened the vials of her wrath upon him, and had almost ordered him from the house, she was overwhelmed with blank despair.

Now, when she would fain make amends, the helplessness of a single woman in dealing with a single man oppressed her. She felt powerless to make any advance for fear of her intention being misconstrued. She knew Gundry's reputation of being a man who shunned women, and even had

she been assured that he would have received graciously her overtures towards a better understanding, she would have shrunk from making them. As it was, the keenest pang of her suffering lay in the conviction that never again was there a probability of their being on any but the most distant of terms.

Still, Belle felt that, much as she dreaded a casual meeting with Felix Gundry, the notion of betaking herself beyond the possibility of the bitter-sweet of a chance-encounter would only add to her wretchedness. So, though Mrs. Hornecke wished her to accompany her to Canada, and John and Eileen urged her to remain at Winton Square throughout the winter, she decided to take her bruised heart back to the desolate cottage, where, if she was far from her relatives, she was within seeing distance of the man she had so sorely wounded.

The day before Mrs. Hornecke sailed brought a meeting with an old friend, a haphazard encounter.

Belle had gone to the Army and Navy Stores to purchase, on behalf of the intending voyager, a specific against sea-sickness recommended by a mendacious acquaintance as infallible. In the drug department she ran against Major Bryson. He appeared to her to look ill, or if not actually ill,

dull and dispirited; and the fact that at the moment of their meeting he was negotiating the purchase of an india-rubber hot-water bottle did not presage a robust state of health. During the minute-and-a-half's conversation that was all Belle's haste permitted, she gathered that his chief complaint was that of acute self-commiseration.

The following day, when, having returned from seeing Mrs. Hornecke off by rail to join her liner at Liverpool, Belle was free to sit by the fire, in the murk of a November afternoon, and over a lone cup of tea review matters, it surprised her to remember how little the random meeting with her former cherished acquaintance had moved her.

She did not guess that at that moment Major Bryson, moping over a sulky fire in his sitting-room, was bewailing his bachelordom, and thinking how much better it might have been for him had he carried out his first intention of asking the hand of Miss Fleming. That her younger sister had married well, he had learned. John Hornecke, he knew, was a man of solid position. From the fact of Eileen's marriage, and the knowledge of the Turntowers' public evidence of favour, he imagined that Belle must have given him an exaggerated account of the anticipated change in the family finances.

If he had only not been so quick to take fright, he thought, *he* might have been honeymooning in sunshine on the Riviera with Belle, instead of cowering desolately over a stubborn fire in London alone.

Since that July day when he had warily abandoned the intention of proposing marriage to Belle Fleming, circumstances had changed with Major Bryson. A long-expected inheritance had added some hundreds to his yearly income, enabling him to quit his one-roomed "chambers" and indulge in a smart suite of bachelor apartments; an accommodation, however, that his economical soul esteemed but a poor equivalent for the coin expended on its acquirement. Once a man has, either from necessity or choice, fallen into the habit of extracting the utmost value from every penny expended, he never again can lightly regard the disbursement of money.

As a younger man Bryson had prided himself upon the slimness of his figure, but within very recent years an inconsiderable increase of bulk had caused him quite unnecessary uneasiness. He had left a tailor who, when fitting him, had chosen to make a wholly gratuitous remark respecting the slight expansion of his waist measurement, bestowing his custom upon a rival scissors who was dis-

creet enough to refer only to any extension of chest, and to preserve silence regarding so invidious a subject as increase of the lower circumference.

Rigid dieting, from a desire to decrease weight, had rendered him dyspeptic and nervous. He imagined himself the victim of a mysterious ailment that he felt assured was neuritis. And his waking hours were tortured by the recollection that neuritis is occasionally supposed to signalise the approach of creeping paralysis, or of something equally lugubrious.

He had tried the bracing effect of a visit to a Northern shooting, whence a few days of alternate soaking with rain and chilling by snell winds had driven him back to London. Convinced that he was trembling on the verge of an attack of rheumatic fever, he arrived in town to find his sympathetic physician on holiday, and the few visible members of his Club singularly apathetic regarding his apprehensions.

Sitting huddled up over the sulky fire, a travelling plaid across his knees, Bryson had dreams of a house of his own; a dwelling wherein he would be the first consideration, where the requirements of his health would meet with the necessary attention, where the grave question of his diet would attain a

degree of importance at present denied it. In his bachelor chambers they were accustomed to catering for robust manhood, not for invalids; and the beef-tea off which he had just made a sorry luncheon was white and watery, the accompanying toast sodden and flabby.

A house demanded a wife. Passing in mental review the marriageable women of his acquaintance, the thought of Belle Fleming recurred to him in a flash of fitness. She, he was convinced, would promptly accept him. There would be no difficulty regarding that, and as he did not feel either mentally or physically equal to pleading with obdurate females, there was abundant satisfaction in the idea. Belle he knew was a capable and ecconomical manager. If anyone could make a good show with his money it would be Belle Fleming.

During their short interview amid the patent medicines and perfumery of the Stores Drug Department, he had gathered that she was staying at the Horneckes' house in Winton Square. So thither, next afternoon, journeyed Bryson, with the fixed intention, for the second time, of asking Belle Fleming to marry him.

Here also luck seemed against him. Belle had that morning returned to Devonshire. After having

existed for an unconscionable number of years without a wife, Major Bryson, having at length made up his mind to secure the promise of one, felt as though the delay of a day would be unendurable. Returning to his rooms, he made arrangements for leaving town next morning by the western morning express.

## CHAPTER XXX

### Mrs. Chalfont Intervenes

MEANTIME Belle had reached Lavender Lea, to find a vague autumnal depression brooding over the external aspect of the cottage. In the borders only a few pale lilac chrysanthemums and sundry bushes of blossom-flecked star-worts had survived the nights of early frost that had blackened the cactus dahlias and shrivelled the heliotrope and mignonette in the pots on the window-sills.

To Belle's eyes the effect of the variant shades of purple, that in summer had looked so refreshingly cool, was one of melancholy. And the thought that in company with her heart the house was mourning the loss of Eileen struck her half whimsically.

Venturing into the pretty drawing-room, whose spick-and-span appearance gave it a chill unused appearance, she missed Eileen's work-basket, and the homely litter of a used room. The gardening books and papers, and the modest green-clad volume from which Eileen had learned how to cajole her hens

into laying when eggs were scarce, had been neatly put away in the dining-room bookcase. And the knowledge that, except for her own influence, the chamber would lack the pleasant lived-in aspect of an occupied place brought Belle a keen sense of her loneliness. Previously she and Eileen had rarely been apart for more than a few days at a time, and the prospect of the years to come seemed interminable.

On the hall table was arranged a little collection of visiting-cards to which Cecilia proudly drew her mistress's attention. Evidently the knowledge of the Turntowers' connection and the news of Eileen's wedding had resulted in Strete Tything society deciding to take Miss Fleming to its collective bosom.

Belle smiled a little scornfully as she turned the cards over. Less than a year ago the attention would have gratified her. Now, alone, and with a dull ache at her heart whenever she thought of Gundry, she did not seem to care. Were he at enmity with her, as she believed him to be, the attitude of the remainder of the world was of little importance.

Somebody once said that the Flemings' home was a restful one because they never indulged themselves with pets, and so could give attention to their

visitors undisturbed by the incessant demands of domestic animals. Now Belle had brought back with her Mrs. Hornecke's fox-terrier, Jock; much justly beloved canine friend whom his owner, out of sympathy for Belle's prospective loneliness, had insisted upon entrusting to her care. And in that the kindly Mrs. Hornecke had shown wisdom; for, even at the close of the day of arrival, Belle was constrained to admit that the sight of his pathetically intelligent eyes interestedly watching her every movement, and even the making of the necessary arrangements concerning his food, and the establishment of his sleeping-basket, had helped to render her first evening alone less desolate.

Retiring to bed early, Belle read herself drearily to sleep, to be awakened in the morning by Jock scratching at her door. Her solitary breakfast over, the orders given, and her inspection of the lad's labour over, Belle found an empty day stretching before her. In the past, which already seemed so long ago, the days had appeared absurdly short for their multifarious pleasant little interests.

Determined not to give way to depression, Belle ordered the removal of the pots containing the shrivelled remains of the heliotrope and mignonette that in their season had made so fragrant a decora-

tion for the window-sills; and driving in to the nurseryman's at Pennyland, returned home with pots of brilliant-berried winter cherries wherewith to replace them. The vivid orange and scarlet berries were in direct defiance of the subdued colour-scheme that had led to the rechristening of the cottage. But, as Belle wisely decided, their bright hues were better suited to the dull season, when borders were bare. In spring the lavender and purple would regain their monopoly.

As she drove past the Battlements, unconsciously checking the speed of the pony, the house within the high walls seemed as sombre and retentive of its secrets as ever. Belle did not know whether the owner was in residence. While in London she had always thought of him as at home. Now that she had reached his location, the notion that he might be absent struck chill to her heart. A simple question put to Cecilia would have brought enlightenment; but, fearful of revealing her interest, Belle hesitated to ask it.

Luncheon over, and the new plants arranged along the window-sills, Belle settled herself by the drawing-room fire; Jock, his eyes anxiously watching her, crouched on the rug at her feet.

Rucker had reported a case of leg-weakness in

one of the young cockerels, and Belle, the *Poultry Breeder and Feeder* in her hand, was studying up diseases in order to discover a cure, when a man's tread on the flagged path outside drove the blood from her cheek.

The visitor knocked; and Belle sat, breathless, agitated, wondering, as she awaited his entrance,—for she had no doubt that the one demanding admittance was Gundry,—what she would do when he was shown in.

With the second summons the knowledge of one of those embarrassments to which a household is liable where only one maid is kept flashed upon her. At that crucial moment Cecilia was in the act of making her afternoon toilet—or as she would have tersely phrased it, "cleaning" herself—and it was incumbent upon her mistress to discharge her duty of opening the door.

Trembling in every limb, and handicapped by a sense of leg-weakness that even in that moment of agitation she could not help thinking was ridiculously reminiscent of the ailing fowl whose case she had so recently been attempting to diagnose, Belle opened the door and discovered—Major Bryson!

Confronted with the last person she anticipated seeing in Strete Tything, Belle instantly recovered

the self-possession that, with the idea that Felix Gundry stood in front of that closed door, had so ignominiously deserted her.

The man whose coming excites a woman one season may be the indifferent acquaintance of the next. A year ago Belle had no conception of Gundry's existence. Then it was the expected advent of Major Bryson that alone held power to make her palpitate and tremble. Now she was able to receive him with a calm cordiality that a man more skilled in feminine subtleties might have regarded as ominous.

Taking her guest into the drawing-room, Belle expressed a genial interest in his coming; her surprise at his unheralded appearance in Strete Tything finding vent in certain decidedly disconcerting questions as to the nature of his mission in visitng such an out-of-the-world place in November.

More from an innate sense of hospitality than from any lingering regard for the fair-weather friend who so basely had deserted them when clouds threatened to gather, she listened attentively to Bryson's dismal prophecies that the combined nerve-jarring produced by the shaking in the train and the additional jolting in the fly would induce a return of his neuritis.

She lent a communicative ear also to his detailed account of the positively iniquitous luncheon with which he had been insulted at the Setting Sun. And she revealed a practical sympathy by promptly ordering an early and substantial tea.

It was over this cosy little meal that the calculating suitor unburdened his soul of its desire. "Would Belle marry him?"

In all probability it was the absence of the expected expression of overwhelmed gratification at his gracious generosity that incited Bryson to recount precipitately the comfortable settlement that his recent inheritance would enable him to make, and to refer specially to the pension to which as his widow she would be entitled.

Belle heard all silently. She may have shrunk from a continuance of the lonely life that had so recently opened before her, and undoubtedly there is something that appeals to every woman in the position and possibilities implied by matrimony. Yet she hesitated. Chief factor in her hesitation was probably the unworthy desire of one tortured heart to wound another.

Were she to marry Major Bryson, and leave Strete Tything for ever, would Felix Gundry be sorry? she wondered.

Her passionate soul resented the notion that Gundry should witness her living on, year after year, at the cottage, developing more and more of the village spinster in her aspect and ways, the while he cherished the belief that, did he choose at any time to claim her, she would be his for the asking. The neighbours, too;—the thought flashed swiftly;—what a triumph it would be over those who had viewed their coming to the village with cold distrustful eyes, did she, like Eileen, make a good marriage and return to London. She wondered what Mrs. Chalfont and Miss Rodd would say did they hear, before a few months had elapsed, that she also was honeymooning at the Turntowers' villa on the Riviera?

The thoughts crowded swiftly one upon another. All the motives that urged to an alliance with Major Bryson were unworthy her better self, but Belle did did not stop to consider that.

"We could have a flat in town—quite a *good* flat," the Major was saying complacently, "one in a nice locality that would easily let when we went abroad, as my health might require. We might arrange to spend the early months of the year in Algiers. Sir Elton Baggs assured me that in his opinion the sunshine of Morocco would be decid-

edly beneficial to my constitution, though curiously enough he completely disagreed with Professor Garnet Windbrace, who recommended Egypt, as to the nature of my complaint. Suppose we were to get married just after Christmas—so as to avoid the rush of the holiday travel. Then we——"

But at this point Belle collected her wandering thoughts. Major Bryson was taking too much for granted.

"Stop!" she exclaimed, half laughing, half vexed. "Don't go quite so fast. *I* haven't said anything about marriage. I don't know whether I wish to be married at all!"

At which rank heresy, Major Bryson probably felt as astounded as King Cophetua might have done had the beggar-maid revealed her intention of declining to share his kingdom.

He was on the point of uttering an astonished protest, when the imperative knock of another caller intervened, providing him with a fresh grievance.

"Who is that?"

"Visitors evidently—I don't know whom."

"Say you're not at home," he demanded, as Cecilia's footsteps creaked through the hall. Belle shook her head.

"Too late. Besides, they must have seen your fly at the gate."

Next moment she had risen, and with all the urbanity at her command, was receiving Mrs. Chalfont and Miss Arabella Rodd.

His suit thus interrupted, Major Bryson, outwardly polite but inwardly fuming, lingered in the forlorn hope of outstaying the interlopers. Something of the idea that possession is nine points of the law governed his attitude towards the newcomers; but Mrs. Chalfont, now eager to make up her lost ground with Belle, sat blandly on, secure in the convention that rules that the caller who has come first must depart before more recent arrivals.

So the tedious minutes dragged by. Mrs. Chalfont bleated platitudes in the politely attentive ears of her perturbed hostess, Miss Rodd prattled artlessly of many things to the Major, whose consciousness was dominated only by two matters; the first being a growing conviction that these "dam' women", as he mentally apostrophised them, would never go; the second, a certainty that each waiting moment was augmenting the hire of the Setting Sun fly.

At length, on witnessing Mrs. Chalfont return an appreciative—"Well—thank you. Though I know

I oughtn't. But really, your tea is *delicious*. Two lumps, please,"—to Belle's tentative offer of a second cup, the baffled suitor rose to go.

In the tiny hall whither Belle accompanied him, Bryson began to plead for an answer to the question he had journeyed from London to ask.

"*Hush!*"

Belle pointed a warning finger to the half-open drawing-room door, beyond which an ominous silence hinted at listening ears.

"Then may I come to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes. Come to-morrow."

"To-morrow,—early?"

"Yes. To-morrow, early," assented Belle hurriedly. With an ardent pressure of her hand that foretold what he imagined her answer would be, Bryson had gone. And Belle, feeling somehow as though she had set the seal to her own death-warrant, was free to resume her interrupted conversation.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### The Winning Post

At length Mrs. Chalfont departed, the exceeding warmth of her farewells leaving her hostess with a bewildered impression that by some means unknown to herself she had become that lady's dearest friend.

Dusk had fallen when Belle, sitting low over the drawing-room fire, was free to puzzle out the problem set her by Major Bryson. It was quite dark, and the fire had sunk to its embers, when Cecilia, entering to announce supper and to apologise for forgetting to bring the lamp, found her no nearer a solution.

Little more than a year ago, when Bryson was a poorer man, had he offered himself Belle knew she would gladly have accepted him. Now the glamour had fallen from her eyes. She saw him as he really was, hypochondriac, self-centred, a man whose sole concern was his own comfort. She clearly realised that, did she accept him, she would

rank merely as assistant administrator to his well-being, that never again would she be free to govern her way of life. But she also knew, or thought she knew, that did she decide to marry Bryson she would for ever clear the corroding thought of her own foolish treatment of Gundry from her memory. Once beyond danger of a chance meeting, and out of hearing of the constant references to Gundry and his doings which at Strete Tything harassed her, she might be able to forget; might cease to scourge her quivering soul with the recollection of the unjust blame she had thrust upon him when he called the morning after the Uplands Court entertainment.

Had not a mixture of pride and shame prevented her, Belle would fain have told Felix Gundry how bitterly she had regretted her unworthy action. The many reasons that restrain a woman from taking the initiative hampered her, dragging her back when she would gladly have humbled herself to confess that she blamed herself alone for the blight that had so suddenly despoiled their rapidly strengthening friendship. Mrs. Hewson had once made the sweeping statement that Gundry's avoidance of women arose from the fact that every unmarried woman in the district had thrown her

cap at him, and Belle maintained a fixed determination that never would he have any encouragement to class her with the majority.

Still, the knowledge that she had lost the respect of the one being whose approbation she so greatly desired, aroused a perpetual nagging pain at her heart; and the idea that, did she agree to marry Bryson, she could leave her present environment and in the pleasant excitement of travel forget the past, tempted her.

Torn by conflicting thoughts, Belle sat late; and after she had gone to bed she lay awake staring into the darkness, as though there seeking the solution of her difficulty. The Horneckes were beyond reach, but even had they been at hand Belle knew that she could not have laid bare before them these intimate facts of the case, that the decision lay with herself alone. Resolving at length, out of sheer weariness, to accept Bryson, she fell miserably to sleep.

It would have comforted Belle had she known that while she was troubled by retrospection regarding Felix Gundry, his mind was even more exercised by cogitations regarding her.

He had dined that night at Uplands Court, to find his aunt and Miss Rodd communicative re-

specting their visit to Lavender Lea, and positively garrulous in conjectures regarding the probable mission of the masculine visitor they had met there.

Arabella, in her desire to pique Felix on her own behalf—the astute maiden had long ago decided that she had been mistaken in regarding Miss Fleming as a rival—esteemed it politic to affect a warm admiration for Major Bryson, subtracting in her zeal years from his age, adding inches to his stature, and a brilliance, which it certainly had not revealed, to his conversation.

As he drove home Gundry, who habitually ignored feminine chatter, found himself uneasily recalling the gossip. Driving by the cottage, where a solitary light glowed dismally, it was with a swift catch of the breath that the thought flashed upon him of a day when, passing by, he might find the one light extinguished and the cottage deserted.

Stripped of all Miss Rodd's flowers of fancy, the fact remained that a certain Major Bryson, a London friend of the Flemings, who was also acquainted with the Turntowers, had chosen the least attractive season of the year to make a special journey to Strete Tything to see Miss Fleming. That event, taken in conjunction with Belle's very recent stay in town, appeared even to Gundry's literal common

sense to point to only one conclusion. It gave him an unholy joy to remember that Major Bryson's visit had been interrupted by the entrance of other guests: joy somewhat tempered by the recollection that his informants' sharp ears had overheard the visitor promise to return early on the morrow.

Alone in his snuggery, when the house with all the outside world was still, Gundry unlocked the drawer that on one unlucky day had been left open, and, taking out the slim black slippers with the red heels, put them tenderly on the tiles just within the curb fender. Thereafter he sat silently smoking and watching the firelight glint on the satin toes.

Eileen Fleming's wedding had taken by surprise Strete Tything, where marriages were but of rare occurrence and usually took place after long conjecture and elaborate preparation. It was with an uneasy foreboding that the morrow might bring news of Belle's prospective alliance, that Gundry locked away the empty slippers and, knocking the ashes from his burnt-out pipe, went dejectedly upstairs to bed.

The Setting Sun fly, chartered by Major Bryson, was crawling along the road towards Strete Tything next morning, when Gundry on horseback overtook it.

Bryson, who had endured what to his ultra-sensitive temperament seemed an interminable evening passed in a so-called private sitting-room at the Setting Sun, and an even less tolerable night spent on the lumpy mattress of that inn's state bedroom, scarcely presented the joyous aspect customarily associated with successful lovers. But that he was thus early on his way to the cottage augured the worst. In the chill of a November morning one would hardly select as pastime even a short drive in a mildewed country fly, along a sodden country lane.

Bryson's expression so plainly attested his distaste, that the mere conception of Belle agreeing to pass her life with this querulous-looking being fired Gundry's antagonism.

A sudden resolve not to let slip, for any reason, what might be his last chance of coming to a better understanding with Belle, took instant possession of Gundry. While there yet remained a possibility that she was not bound by honour, he would see her, would learn from her own lips whether there was any hope for himself.

Quickening his speed, he swiftly left the lumbering vehicle well in the rear, and had reached the outskirts of the village, when an imperative sum-

mons from Mrs. Campkins, who stood by her gate waving a clean apron as signal, caused him to pull up.

"Well? What is it?" Resenting the detention, his tone was somewhat testy. "Can't you see I'm in a hurry?"

The trouble, it appeared, demanded immediate treatment. "Their father," as Mrs. Campkins designated her taciturn, industrious husband, had had the misfortune to run a splinter of wood into his hand. He was at home. Would the doctor step in and look at it?

Dismounting and throwing the reins to a young Campkins, Gundry, not without an apprehensive glance down the road, whereon to his secret relief the fly was not visible, followed her into the house.

The injury, though slight, demanded skilful treatment. Gundry had extracted the splinter, washed the wound, and was binding it up with an antiseptic bandage, when the fly slowly rumbled by. Not even an affair of the heart could induce Gundry to neglect his work. The bandaging completed to the accompaniment of Mrs. Campkins' confidential remarks on the occupant of the vehicle, whom she, from private information acquired from Cecilia,

somewhat prematurely labelled as Miss Fleming's "fi-ancy."

Gundry's instructions that the sling was not to be discarded without his permission were shouted over his shoulder as he hurried down the garden-path. A moment later he was in the saddle, speeding in the direction taken by the fly.

Bryson was alighting at the green gate of Lavender Lea when the Doctor rode up. For the moment the unconscious soldier had the advantage. Because although Bryson moved deliberately, with the air of one who considers himself a precious charge, Gundry was handicapped by the care of his steed; and even a man hot-foot on a love-chase scarce dare leave a horse at large in a village street. Having secured his reins to the gate-post, Gundry was free to follow his rival.

He reached the doorstep in a couple of strides, to find Bryson on the point of being admitted. Cecilia, being unversed in the conduct of so delicate a situation, merely gasped her astonishment at discovering two gentlemen awaiting entrance in place of one. Then, having shown both into the drawing-room, she departed to summon her mistress.

For quite a minute Belle, scarce knowing whether to laugh or cry, stood outside the closed drawing-

room door, lacking courage to open it. What Felix Gundry's appearance at the cottage foretold she could not guess. Since that September morning whose recollection still brought a sharp pang of shame, they had not spoken to each other.

She had supposed herself ready to become Major Bryson's wife. But with the knowledge that Felix Gundry was actually under the same roof with her, that of his own choice he had sought her out, that within the next few seconds they would stand face to face, palm to palm, all Belle's resolution wavered.

Once inside the room confronting the two men, Belle marvelled that she had ever seriously considered the possibility of abandoning her dream of Gundry for the actuality of Bryson.

In the morning a dyspeptic is rarely seen at his best. Major Bryson was upset by the discomforts of the second-rate country hostelry, annoyed at a fate that kept extending his sojourn amongst those his ultra-fastidious taste elected to consider barbarians, by persistently interposing human obstacles to a *tête-à-tête* with Belle. His face wore an aggrieved expression, his voice assumed an injured tone.

Gundry, with his healthy out-of-door atmosphere and his look of quiet resolution, appeared to Belle

infinitely superior in manliness. Given in greeting, the Major's gloved hand felt chilly and effeminate; while the warm grasp of Gundry's naked hand sent the blood coursing hot through her veins.

Gundry spoke little. It was Bryson, who was always ready to do the proper social thing, who introduced subjects of conversation, though the topics he selected were hardly inspiriting, being chiefly of the wretched accommodation offered at Pennyland, the unexpected chill of the Devon atmosphere, and the inconvenient distance Strete Tything was from a railway-station.

Though Gundry's replies were monosyllabic, his deep rich voice showed a marked contrast to Major Bryson's thin tones. Sitting impatiently flicking his leather gaiters with his hunting-crop, Gundry eyed Belle closely from beneath his thick eyebrows. He saw her fugitive colour come and go, saw from the agitation she tried so hard to conceal that she was painfully conscious of the impending crisis in her life.

Major Bryson, suddenly realising that the intruder was a medical practitioner,—a fact the riding-garb had caused him at first to overlook,—seized upon the opportunity of securing a fresh opinion free of charge.

He had just begun to solicit Dr. Gundry's estimate of the varied treatments of neuritis as favoured by certain leading London specialists, when Gundry, rising to his feet with the air of one quite oblivious —as indeed he was—that his fellow-visitant was speaking, addressed himself to their hostess.

"I must go."

Gundry spoke decisively; and Belle, the spirits that his coming had so foolishly uplifted sunk to zero, her attempted utterance checked by a lump in her throat, rose without protest, and mechanically extended her hand. But her token of farewell Gundry chose to ignore. With a curt bow to the justly offended Major, he opened the door, crossed the hall, and entered the dining-room, whither Belle perforce had to follow him.

"Who is that man?" His tone was abrupt, almost domineering, and Belle replied meekly:

"Major Bryson. A friend of ours from London."

"What does he want here?"

The unconcealed suspense betrayed by his words, the anxiety in his intent gaze, the interest revealed by his having taken her apart to question her, all combined to restore to Belle something of the self-possession that so basely had deserted her.

"What does he want here?"

With the repetition of the question there returned also a hint of her old coquetry.

"I think he wants—*me!*"

"Does he? Wise man. So do I. Belle . . . look at me." With the words, Gundry took her face in both his hands and held it so that his compelling eyes looked straight into hers. With the contact Belle's coquetry had vanished, charmed away by dominating emotion. "Belle—tell me—which is it to be—Bryson or I?"

Her face was aflame now, her whole being vibrant. Her nerves had been transformed into harp strings from which the slightest touch of his strong brown fingers had power to extract melody.

"Speak . . ." he urged. "Which is it to be?" Still Belle was silent. The thought of the man who sat alone, awaiting her answer, smote her with a sense of disloyalty. Then Gundry, bending forward, kissed her full on the lips.

"*Now.* Which is it?" he demanded triumphantly.

"You . . oh . . you!"

Belle's words came in a little shuddering sigh breathed close against his cheek. His arms were tight around her, and the comforting assurance that

never again would she be alone filled her empty heart to overflowing.

Meanwhile the basely deserted Major awaited Belle's return with rapidly increasing impatience.

This visit from a doctor struck him as unpleasantly ominous, and the lengthened interview seemed to augment his uneasiness. If there was any likelihood of Belle being an invalid, her chief attraction for him would be gone. A man of his sensitive organism, he argued, required a robust wife, one with abundant energy to devote to his care.

The harassing conviction that, after all, he might not have acted wisely in deciding to change his condition preyed upon him. Still, as a man of honour, he knew he could not withdraw the proposal he had made.

Soothing his fretted nerves with a phenacetin tabloid, Bryson glanced irritably at the timepiece. The one tolerable train of the day left Pennyland at 1.15, and not for all the prospective spouses in Britain would he contemplate spending a second night in the mouldy best chamber of the Setting Sun.

As the minutes ticked by, Bryson's annoyance increased. His patience exhausted, he rang the bell. Somewhere in the back premises its tinkle sounded

faintly. Unfortunately at that moment Cecilia chanced to be out of earshot feeding the hens, so the summons remained unanswered.

Consumed with righteous wrath at treatment such as surely so eligible a suitor is rarely called upon to endure, Bryson quitted the room fired with the purpose of reminding his hostess of his apparently forgotten presence.

From the dining-room came the low murmur of voices.

Taking his umbrella with intentional clatter from the stand, Bryson knocked with the handle on the hall table. At the summons the dining-room door opened, and Belle, suddenly become conscious of her exceeding remissness, appeared, full of contrition.

"Excuse my disturbing you. I fear I cannot wait longer. I rang, but no one answered," the Major's tone was icily polite. "I came this morning to learn whether——"

"Yes, yes," Belle interrupted hurriedly. "And I'm so sorry . . . but I'm afraid the answer must be No."

"Then there is no need for further delay." It is one thing to imagine one regrets having made an offer of marriage, quite another to find that regretted proposal rejected. So if the Major's manner was

that of an injured man, it might be excused. "I return at once to town. Good-bye."

"We had forgotten Major Bryson," confessed contrite Belle, re-entering the dining-room.

"Major Bryson—who wanted to remember Major Bryson?" retorted the graceless Gundry.

THE END

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